









# MANHANDLED

BY

ARTHUR STRINGER

AND

RUSSELL HOLMAN

ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES  
FROM THE PHOTOPLAY  
A PARAMOUNT PICTURE  
STARRING GLORIA SWANSON



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TO

SIDNEY R. KENT

Without whom *Manhandled* would not  
and could not have been written





# MANHANDLED

## CHAPTER I

**I**F YOU are a patron of vaudeville, and if you have a good memory and a touch of sentiment in your make-up, you will probably recall McGuire and McGuire.

Not that their standing in the profession would ever keep them fresh in your mind. For McGuire and McGuire were not of the elite of the two-a-day that enjoys the pick of the dressing-rooms, lawsuits with managers, musical-comedy offers and incomes from phonograph records. Their names seldom flashed forth in electricity above theater marquees. They never occupied the enviable "next-to-closing" position on the bill of the Palace on Broadway, or, in fact, the Palace anywhere.

If you fail to recollect the name, perhaps you may remember their act, *A Quiet Evening at Home*.

The curtain rolled aloft to disclose a tenement-house room such as mortal eye never rested on before. It combined in riotous disarray the features of living-room, bedroom, kitchen and bath. A can-

ary sang lustily in a battered cage suspended on the clothes-line. The hooks studding the open door of the one closet held pans, wearing apparel and a huge advertising calendar. With a loud preliminary clatter outside the door, Frank McGuire entered. His red good-natured face, surmounted by the even redder and, in his last few years, rapidly thinning hair, could hardly be seen through the load of bundles of all sizes and shapes that he was heroically striving to carry. Stumbling over the door-sill, he suddenly dropped these bundles, dropped them with a deafening crash, abetted by the orchestra's cymbals. And the audience roared both at his misfortune and the comical chagrin that suffused his face.

Then, planted amid his torn and scattered burden, McGuire began roaring for "Babe! Babe!" No one appearing, he sighed prodigiously, donned a dirty apron, and, first clearing the crude kitchen table of a score of motley objects with a majestic sweep of his arm, proceeded to prepare the evening meal. Lifting the lid of the upright piano, which looked as if it had survived with difficulty a hard campaign in the front lines in France to become a combined music- and ice-box, he produced food from the instrument's innards. His rapid and deft actions were a series of tricks. The audience followed him with fascinated delight.

At the height of his clowning, the door burst open anew, and a puffing, perspiring, and, during the final seasons of the act, rather corpulent and doggedly blonde woman came bustling in. This was the missing "Babe," the other half of McGuire and McGuire. Her first lines—racy, in the New York patois of the lower strata, and delivered in a rich, pleasingly hoarse contralto—were a bristling defense of her lateness. No, she didn't get the job. Walked her feet off, she had, to every department store in New York. And in the last one that fresh snip of a manager—

McGuire thereupon accused her of flirting. They bickered, they pleaded with each other ridiculously, they exploded with hilarious fun, they almost came to blows. McGuire dumped a pair of shoes out of a pan, produced a gas-stove miraculously and bent his energies upon frying an egg. Their quarrel broke out afresh, gained violence while the top galleries screamed and whistled with delight. "Babe" shied one of the discarded shoes at her mate. He retorted with the still liquid egg. They raced around the room. The folding-bed came hurtling from the wall and struck the stage with a resounding whack and an avalanche of blankets, pillows and a wildly shrilling alarm clock. The gas stove was catapulted from its moorings. McGuire leaped on

top of the hollow piano, ruining its balance and sending it crashing to the floor. Groping wildly to break his fall, he seized the portières and stripped them from their rings in his mad career, landing on the floor in the midst of them, while "Babe," sent spinning backward, stumbled into the half-filled tin bathtub and there, half inundated, sank disheveled and breathless to rest.

Thus, the climax of the act achieved, McGuire as a parting flash of inspiration sprang up, seized a broom, and, using the handle as a billiard cue, sent the half-loaf of bread that was the sole remnant of the supper remaining on the table spinning into the involuntary bather's lap. Turning quickly to the denuded portière-rod, he nonchalantly recorded the shot by sharply flicking one of the brass portière rings with his improvised cue, and, striking a pose, faced the audience with a broad grin.

And the curtain came briskly down in the face of the sea of solid laughter and applause.

Such was *A Quiet Evening at Home* as delineated by McGuire and McGuire in their prime upon the chief vaudeville circuits of America, not to speak of three sojourns to England, France and Germany and a memorable trek to Australia. It stood, assuredly, no great contribution to the art of the stage. Frankly slapstick it was, and, in spots, crassly vul-

gar. And McGuire and McGuire would have been the first to deny that it was anything else. Yet, to the discerning eye and to the heart that is sensitively attuned to the human tragi-comedy, it was something else.

For into this melange of noise and nonsense that furnished them with their livelihood, Mr. and Mrs. Frank McGuire, perhaps quite unconsciously, injected a touch of their own personality. And this gift of personality (for to an amazing degree the McGuires even before their marriage had much in common and had later been welded into one circle of interest and action by their wedding-ring) set them just a little apart from the ordinary vaudevillian.

*A Quiet Evening at Home*, with all its crudity, with all its formlessness and lack of attempt at anything beyond the production of cheap laughter, had a note of the wistful, of the groping, about it. You liked "Babe" and her rough and husky consort. Here, you somehow felt, were a lowly couple fighting the age-old battle of New York, trying amid ridiculous surroundings and fearful handicaps to achieve a living in the great stern city. The bundles that McGuire came staggering in under were almost a symbol. When his world came crashing down upon his broad shoulders, and, rising amid the

wreck, he triumphantly clicked the portière ring, it was something akin to the happy ending of an allegory.

Yes, there was a note of the wistful and upward-climbing and lovable about the elder McGuires even in their public appearances. If you recall their act, you probably remember feeling that too.

It was in the early years of *A Quiet Evening at Home* that, in the midst of summer and a long stretch of one-night stands, bad hotels and almost insufferable heat in the Middle West, Frank McGuire noticed his partner becoming steadily less and less spontaneous and more and more labored in the spirited gyrations about the stage which her rôle demanded, though she gamely protested that she could go on.

And so, wiring their agency that they were "laying off" for a few weeks, they picked out the coolest near-by town along the Mississippi containing the best hospital and hotel that they could afford. There another McGuire came into the world—a girl baby with the velvety white skin and violet eyes of her mother and the pertly turned-up and inquisitively Celtic nose of her father. They christened her Theresa, after Nora McGuire's mother. But from the first she was known as Tess.

Frank McGuire looked at the little white miracle,

for the first time. He looked at her through misty eyes, knowing the ordeal of Nora, who had left her job almost too late for her health, had been a cruel one. Then he exclaimed, "Some little trouper she'll be."

And Nora answered weakly, but with a flash of her own Irish self, "That she will not."

Frank, to her surprise and delight, understood and was in instant sympathy with the thought she had warmed half fearfully within her bosom, from the time she first knew there was to be a baby.

"Two troupers in this family is enough, eh, old girl?" he asked, with smiling comprehension, venturing almost reverently to pat his wife's wan cheek. "We'll make a blooming lady of her, eh?"

The wistfulness, the groping of the McGuires, was seeking and hoping to have found, at last, an outlet.

By the time they were ready to start on the road again, they had made their plans about Tess. Nora McGuire had an unmarried sister in a country town in Connecticut, on Long Island Sound, some ten miles from New London. Nora's family, in fact, had originated in Marysville, and there was sentiment as well as expediency in the plan she framed for her daughter, whose red and puckered features were fast achieving recognizably human contours,

just as the stout little body was steadily gaining even more than the requisite eight ounces a week.

“You’ve met Kitty, Frank,” she urged her husband. “Remember, she was the only one of my folks who had enough pep and interest to come to New York and see us spliced. Kitty’s a crab in many respects, but her heart is O. K. She’s all of ten years older than me, and, oh, much more refined. Had a normal school education and taught school for years until, as she says, the kids got on her nerves. So she had to quit. She got all of my folk’s money when they died, including what I would have copped if I hadn’t got in wrong by running away and marrying a rotten vaudeville actor.” Taking the sting out of these last words by the typical Noraesque device of seizing a fistful of her husband’s brickish hair, jerking his head back, and kissing him upon the lips.

“Kitty’s got enough to keep her comfortable,” she went on. “She is one of the big bugs in Marysville, as I get it. My idea is to write her and get her to take the baby, on condition we ship her money at definite times for the kid’s board and keep. It’s going to be tough parting with the little varmint, but you and I have got to stay on the job, of course, to beat the well-known wolf from the door. And we can’t go tramping a month-old kid all over the



country in this heat and with the rotten places we stop at."

"Besides," Frank McGuire added, with a whimsical grin upon his lined and tired and middle-aged face, "we don't want her trouping, even when she's too young to know what it's all about. I always said to myself, if I had a kid, specially a girl kid, I wouldn't want her on the stage when she grew up. I'd want her to stay away from the show business and Broadway as far as she could get. The show business has been pretty good for us, Nora, and we aren't such bums either. But there's no getting away from it—it takes something out of you. It's like New York. If you want to get by, you've got to give up something, some of the freshness and refinement that you ought to be able to keep. I want my little kid to grow up and have everything that you and I haven't been able to get for ourselves. I want her to have the best education we can buy her. I want her to grow up pretty and innocent, and marry some decent young guy who'll love her. And I only hope to God I live long enough to see all that happen."

And if any of the stage acquaintances of McGuire and McGuire could have glimpsed the bright, almost crusader smiles upon the faces of the new mother and father and the light in their, respectively, very

blue and very violet eyes, they would have been more convinced than ever that there was "somethin' different about them two McGuires."

"Then it's a go that I write Kitty?" Nora finally asked.

"It's a go."

The hospital authorities recommended a competent family to assume temporary custody of the very youthful Miss Theresa McGuire while her parents invaded the sweltering trans-Mississippi hamlets for another month in belated fulfilment of their theatrical contract. At the end of that time, the eager parents bent back upon their trail, accumulated the big-eyed and amazingly healthy Tess, now quite definitely resembling her mother, and an enormous juvenile wardrobe purchased in every town in which they had played, squandered a frightful sum for a compartment in an east-bound train, and a week later were being pulled by two lazy gray horses up shady Main Street, Marysville, in a dusty bus toward the residence of Miss Katherine McNair on the outer edge of town. Tess very kindly obliged by sleeping peacefully, a precious soft white bundle of blanket, in her proud mother's arms.

The McNair homestead, a rambling house of medium size in an attractive September setting of

lawn and garden, appealed to Frank McGuire, who had not seen it since the day, nearly six years before, when he had triumphantly and somewhat arrogantly escorted Nora McNair from under her irate mother's nose out of the door to New York and wedlock. The homestead appealed to him much more, in fact, than did its present owner. For Katherine McNair, looming up grimly behind the pale wisp of a maid-servant who opened the door to the expected visitors, was a woman of forty-five or thereabouts, inclined to those physical proportions which Marysville designated as "skinny." A second glance, however, gave promise of more good nature than one would associate with her appearance. Aside from their reddishly sandy hair, there was little of likeness between Katherine and Nora. Residence amid the rocky rigid soil and customs of New England seemed on the surface effectually to have stifled what there might originally have been of Celtic warmth and gaiety within the angular frame of Katherine, and her sober face, her thin-pressed lips, and her gray eyes that now peered rather coldly from behind the shiny gold-rimmed nose-glasses seemed tokens of the fact that she had never quite reconciled herself to the disconcerting reality of an only sister being an active member of a par-

ticularly low order of the theatrical profession. And married to an actor! And the mother of an actor's offspring!

Nevertheless, Miss McNair could smile, and could claim her own secret virtues, as her sister and Marysville would attest. She was honest, she was generous when she esteemed the cause deserving. Her high sense of duty and a genuine, though, in her mature years, carefully concealed love for Nora had impelled her at the time of her sister's wedding to disregard her outraged sensibilities and her own father and mother and, journeying to New York, to be the sole McNair attendant of the bride at the ceremony. The same sense of duty and responsibility toward Nora was now leading her to assume the guardianship of Nora's baby.

She responded indulgently to Nora's greeting, consisting of a lusty hug and a resounding smack upon Katherine's severe lips, which had never held any terrors for Nora. Turning from Nora's exuberance to Frank, Katherine shook hands with him and said, "How do you do, Frank?" with precision. Then, drawing the fleecy blanket in Nora's arms somewhat gingerly away from the pink little face that it partly concealed, she surveyed the heiress of the McGuires with an appraising eye.

"She is pretty, and she looks quite healthy," Miss

McNair admitted, and thereupon invited her visitors to take chairs and remove their wraps.

Such was Tess McGuire's introduction to Marysville, where, save for certain intervals, she spent the first twenty years of her life.

For five years, McGuire and McGuire faithfully remitted a generous portion of the receipts of *A Quiet Evening at Home* to Marysville, making a rather pathetic little ceremony of it every Saturday night when their check arrived from the booking office. At intervals of about six months, they managed to snatch time for a flying visit to their pride and joy, who never failed to astound them with the physical and mental progress she was making.

"She is such a perfect darling—and so pretty," the ecstatic Nora would breathe.

"She will be a witch among the lads," exulted the other part of McGuire and McGuire, half because he believed it and half for the pleasure of seeing his wife's sister bristle inwardly and glance at him so cloudily.

In the autumn that Tess was five, a railroad bridge in the midst of a Texas wilderness of mesquit and alkali became so strained and weakened by the onslaughts of the rain-swollen river roaring beneath it, that it suddenly gave up the fight in the middle of the night under the additional weight of

a solid train of Pullmans. The thundering of the train ended abruptly to the sharp cracking of heavy wood, shrieks of twisted steel and human beings, prolonged hissing of steam as if from a giant calliope, colossal splashes as cars and locomotive plunged down into the muddy waters and finally, from the two rear coaches that miraculously remained upon the rails, high-leaping flames.

Two days later when the "Big Hook," a derrick mounted on wheels and brought from an impossible distance, had lifted the first of the shapeless cars from the bottom of the river, and workmen with acetyline torches had burned an opening through its steel side, the first bodies recovered were those of a man and a woman locked in each other's arms and, quite characteristically, smiling in death.

Thus fate rang down the final curtain on McGuire and McGuire and *A Quiet Evening at Home*.

## CHAPTER II

**T**HE house stood on elevated ground about three hundred yards in from the shore of the sound. Up to the level of the second floor it was built of native field-stone garnered on the spot when the cellar was dug and blasted. The third floor and the roof were of unpainted shingle, weather-beaten and streaked from the sun and from the storms that beat in from Long Island Sound. The southeast corner of the house swelled into a conical cupola that was not unlike the blockhouses by means of which the earliest settlers of that region used to defend themselves against the marauding Indian. A low wide veranda without a railing ran along the spacious front and around one side. On the other side was the slightly dilapidated porte-cochère.

Here and there gray-black protuberances of the ledge of granite-rock running just under the surface of the broad lawn bulged up above the rich green of the grass. Magnolia, forsythia, rambler-rose and other shrubbery bloomed with man-arranged symmetry among the larger fruit-trees and evergreens,

so that in nearly all seasons the McNair homestead could boast of a colorful settling.

The front of the lawn sloped to a private road. Between this road and the blue waters of the sound stretched the estate of John P. Harlan, retired New York banker and Marysville's rich man. Save for the line of tall Lombardy poplars marking Mr. Harlan's western boundary there was an unobstructed view of the shore from the McNair piazza.

It was a very comfortable house, almost an ideal environment for a lively growing girl.

On a sunny July morning, a youth with wet blond hair plastered sleek against his well-shaped head, with an attractive sun-bronzed face and equally bronzed and stalwart arms and legs revealed generously by the tight and abbreviated black bathing-suit he wore, poised momentarily at the base of the Harlan diving-board. He rose gracefully on his toes, swung both arms limberly aloft above his head, lowered them, and with long springy strides swung out to the tip of the pliant board jutting over the sun-sparkling water. There, balancing an instant and bouncing his hundred and sixty pounds of solid flesh upon the pliant wood, he launched himself through the air in a beautiful parabola and, slanting down like a swiftly-driven arrow, clove the water with the precision of a knife. Fifteen yards out



into the sound, his head bobbed to the surface again. He shook the water from his eyes with a quick, rolling motion, like a dog's. Smiling and treading water, he faced the board again.

"How's that, Skipper?" he called.

The girl in the light blue bathing-suit, faded by the sun until it was almost colorless, from the cement pier upon which the diving-board rested, answered gravely, "Not bad, Todd."

She had been standing there observing his every movement. She did so with the calculating eye of a connoisseur.

"Well, go ahead then—do better. I'm waiting, Skipper."

She walked to the base of the board, posed her wiry little body precisely as Todd had done, swung her thin brown arms aloft and, striding out to the end of the board, embarked and achieved exactly the same rapier entrance into the water as he had, coming to the air again not two feet from his broad shoulders.

"You're there, Skipper," Todd commented and, porpoising briefly, they swam easily to the base of the ladder leading up to the pier, the girl cleaving the water cleanly with a miniature imitation of his powerful stroke.

Tess McGuire had been ten years old a whole

week now. Like most of the successful friendships in the world, her comradeship with Todd Harlan was based on a mutual interest in the same field of endeavor. Todd was a sophomore at Princeton and intended to be the intercollegiate champion fancy-diver that fall. Tess would rather swim than eat, and, moreover, had frequently proved it to the discomfiture of the strict prandial régime that obtained in the McNair household. But then, that was only one of the many annoying things that she, in many ways, incomprehensible Tess did to her Aunt Katherine, with the best intentions in the world.

The latter could not understand, in the first place, why Tess would not content herself with swimming at her own, or rather, her aunt's dock, which was quite safe, since it rose only some two feet above the water at high tide and looked down upon large jagged rocks that made diving impracticable. Two months previous, Tess had invaded the Harlan grounds, as she frequently did, and was looking out so wistfully at the long carpeted diving-plank hovering so invitingly over the cool water beneath that John P. Harlan, coming upon her as he strolled about his grounds, and already her friend of several years' standing, smilingly bestowed upon her an invitation to swim there if she liked.

"I've seen you in the water, you little fish, and I

don't think you'll break your neck!" He patted her on her healthy young cheek. "I suppose, though, your aunt will want to break mine."

In June, Todd, who was Harlan's nephew and made his home with him, returned from Princeton for the summer. On the day after his arrival, dashing down from the house for a dip, he had come upon this amazing girl, tall for her age, brown as an Indian, diving from this really rather dangerous height, diving with the grave nonchalance of a veteran and swimming like an eel. Todd Harlan was at the age where a young man classifies kids as nuisances and obliterates them from his existence. But Tess was different. She was the most amazing kid he had ever seen. Nevertheless, he took little interest in her until she fell into the habit of noting the hours when he did his swimming, which were numerous, for his one passion that summer of his life was to perfect himself as a diver. And Tess made it a point to be on the pier at the same time and imitate every movement essayed by Todd.

Swan, jack-knife, sailor's, somersault, backward somersault—she could do them all. The more difficult ones a little awkwardly, of course, but still very creditable performances. Not only was she far in advance of any other swimmer of her age of either sex, but she was much more proficient than the bulk

of Todd's own friends who dived and frolicked with him at the Harlan pier, which was the nautical rendezvous of the younger, richer set of Marysville.

And so, finally, Todd began showing Tess things about diving, and gradually she became his *protégée*. They were each other's friends and severest critics. Tess was accepted also as a friend of Todd's friends, who, though they bantered him about her good-naturedly, were unanimous in acclaiming his pupil as the diving prodigy of Long Island Sound. And though Aunt Katherine protested vigorously at this continual and preposterous risking of her ward's small neck, she could do very little about it, and fortunately possessed the good sense to realize, from observation, that the water was one place, at least, where Tess was quite able to take care of herself.

Tess was in more ways than one an enigma to the spinster Miss McNair. At ten the girl had the flat supple body of a boy and could do things with it that few boys could do. She could scale a tree with the agility and fearlessness of a squirrel. She could sail the Harlan small-boat with hardly a word of advice from Todd, sprawled along the gunwale. In summer—beginning with her eighth summer at least—she practically lived in her bathing suit, and the previous winter, disdaining the sled-skates which

Aunt Katherine had reluctantly bought for her, she mastered regular man-shaped "hockies."

The mind of Tess was no less active and resilient than her body. At the Marysville school, which she had been attending for four years, she mastered with ridiculous ease the studies which she liked and calmly ignored the others. She already exhibited a distinct and authentic talent for drawing, particularly crude caricature, and a disconcerting flair for mimicry. The austere Miss McNair, though recognizing that her niece was in many respects an unusual child, had never flaunted the fact in public. Possessed of a precocious memory for "lines" and for elocution, Tess had never been used to beguile the good folks of Marysville when they called at the McNair home. Moreover, Katherine McNair did not cultivate this particular gift by putting upon the lips of the child the usual infantile bits of silly doggerel, but taught her selections from Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses* and even more advanced compositions. At the Christmas entertainment given by the Methodist Church of Marysville, Tess had been quite the sensation of the evening.

To Katherine McNair there was something a little disturbing about all this. For she, like McGuire and McGuire, had resolved that under no cir-

cumstances. was there to be another professional actress in the McNair family.

“What you and I ought to do, Skipper,” Todd Harlan bantered, as, resting, they sat swinging their legs lazily over the side of the Harlan pier and luxuriated in the hot sun, “is to take our little act into vaudeville. Harlan and McGuire, the Dazzling Diving Demons, eh?”

“My mother and father were on the stage,” said Tess simply.

“Yes, I know,” Todd replied. He had been told the story of the orphaning of his little pal, and idly wondered how much she had learned of it.

“My auntie would never let us go on the stage, Todd.”

“Why, did she say so?”

“She never said so right out, but I can tell from some things she’s told me. I think it would be very nice to go on the stage. With a big glass tank and everything.” Her expressive violet eyes, the eyes of Nora McGuire, were very bright.

“I’m not going to stay in Marysville all my life, you know. Some day I’m going away. Way to New York, I guess.” She laughed quietly, a little confusedly. “But you won’t tell anybody, will you, Todd? I wouldn’t want auntie to know and feel bad.”

When it came time that September for Todd to go back to college, after announcing one afternoon to Tess that this was to be their final "workout" for a while, he added that he would like to buy her something to remember him by. After a grave puckering of her small forehead, she said that she would like a wrist-watch. In a few days the timepiece mounted on a dainty little plain circlet of gold, bought by the Princeton-speeding youth in New York, arrived. Though Aunt Katherine protested that she had never heard of anything quite so foolish, she made sure that Tess had fastened it securely around her strong little wrist.

In September came also John P. Harlan's three small grandchildren, all about Tess's age. Though none of the trio could swim, they made the Harlan pier their playground and launching-place for their toy boats. The Harlans, who were not used to non-amphibian visitors, offered no protest. Tess was the constant playmate of the two shrill-voiced girls and Tommy, the quiet, anemic-looking boy with his disfiguring spectacles. She felt rather sorry for Tommy; he was so pathetically unable to keep up with the rest in their rather boisterous play, and he tried so hard.

One late afternoon all four were scampering about the pier playing tag when Tommy, who, as usual

was "it," suddenly stumbled against the base of the diving-board and shunted abruptly out into space and down into the gold-green twenty feet of sound. The sister who was nearest the pier-edge emitted a shrill cry at the splash. Tess, who was the farthest away, turned, took in the situation, and in a flash was overboard. A few sturdy strokes and she had the feebly struggling Tommy firmly by the collar and was tugging him lustily to shore. Attaining which, he began crying very loudly and ejecting salt water. Mr. and Mrs. Harlan, who had been lounging upon the piazza, had by this time joined the excited group of children.

Mrs. Harlan, a stout, emotional lady, hugged Tess, soaked clothes and all, and gushed, "Oh, you dear child, whatever would we have done if you hadn't been there? You deserve a Carnegie medal for this. I want to make you a nice present—I really do. Now, what would you like?"

Tess, meantime, was surveying her wet wrist gloomily.

"I've lost my wrist-watch that Todd gave me in the water, Mrs. Harlan," she offered finally, "and you really ought to buy me another one."

"Surely, you amazing child, surely."

"And Tommy will have to have a new pair of glasses."



“But weren’t you wonderful to save his life as you did!”

“Oh, I can take care of boys,” the youngster said a little cockily. “Todd says I’m the best swimmer in Marysville—that is, next to him, of course.”

If Tess’s growing self-reliance during the years that followed disturbed Katherine McNair, it also in a way consoled her. For such self-reliance was a protection to the rapidly growing girl, a sort of guard-rail about her constantly increasing beauty. Once out of the coltish stage, the niece of Marysville’s most respected spinster developed into an unquestionably pretty girl.

As Mrs. John Harlan remarked to her neighbor, Miss McNair, the development of their friendship from mere neighborly politeness to a porch-and-porch intimacy dating from the afternoon of Tommy’s rescue six years before: “You should be very proud of Tess. I understand that she is quite the belle of the high school. The boys seem rather crazy about her.”

“I do not believe in these puppy-love affairs,” commented Tess’s guardian, her sharp gray eyes and nimble fingers intent upon her eternal knitting. “It’s bad enough for young boys and girls to attend the same school at a susceptible age and be constantly thrown together during the day, not to speak of

their association after school hours. Frankly, if I could afford it, I should send Tess to a girls' boarding-school. And I shall be very glad, I can tell you, when she graduates from the high school and starts over to Parksburg to the normal. Though, goodness knows, I shall miss her."

"I can imagine that," sighed the sentimental Mrs. Harlan. "But I don't think these high school dances and things do any harm. Young people will be young people, you know, and I'll never forget what Tess said after she'd pulled poor little Tommy out of the sound. She looked up at me so pertly and said, 'Oh, I can take care of boys.' And I guess she's right. Tess has a mind of her own."

Miss McNair, who was quite aware of that, sighed in turn.

"Almost the only serious argument I have ever had with the child has been about these dances. I forbade her to go to dancing-school, you know, but she has picked dancing up anyway—where, I'm sure I don't know. She's so fond of fun and music and anything lively. She's such a vivacious creature. She's my sister Nora all over again. And she's so forlorn and pathetic every time I refuse to let her go to those school affairs that I've finally had to yield. I've promised in fact that next year when

she'll be seventeen and a senior, I'll leave such things to her own judgment."

Tess, radiantly clad in a new pink bouffant taffeta evening-gown which, after a prolonged argument with her aunt, had been made low-necked and sleeveless, attended the Senior Class Dance of the Marysville High School at Masonic Temple with no less a person than the president of her class and quite the "catch" of the school, Jim Hogan. It was the gala event of her young life, despite the fact that Jim "sat out" every dance.

Jim, Marysville's prize athlete, captain of the school baseball and football teams, was the son of a quiet, mouselike widow whom he was frank in adoring. While there were scores of boys in "the high" who were more nattily dressed, more facile in conversation, more at ease with the girls, there was not a member of the more deadly sex in the big red-brick building who would not have abandoned any of them for big, curly-haired, stalwart Jim with his wholesome smile and his unquestioned supremacy on the fields of athletic combat.

Jim, however, was mildly averse to girls. He did not studiously ignore them, but what with his class-work and his athletics and the strenuous hours he put in out of school trying to help along his by no

means well-to-do mother to run their little establishment on not very fashionable Park Street, he simply had no time for the blandishments of the fair. So he smiled back at the smiles and calculated flattery of the precocious little flirts of the school and treated all the girls with the same uniform quiet courtesy and respect.

Tess was the first one to penetrate the vulnerable heel of this modern young Achilles. His first dawning concern about her was the result of his chief interest, next to his mother, in life, his athletics. One late November afternoon, chancing to pass through the school gymnasium on his way to the locker-room whence he intended to remove his precious football uniform for the winter, Jim saw that there was a girls' basketball game in progress and stopped by for a moment to watch. For a while the game seemed to him to consist of nothing but shrill feminine shrieks and the wild aimless dashing around of twelve bloomer-garbed and perspiring young Dianas after an elusive brown ball that spent most of its time bobbing crazily around on the floor amid clutching fingers. Then a thirteenth girl appeared on the side-lines dressed for the fray, and, at the sight of her, a cry seemed to burst simultaneously from the throats of the six girls who wore the red

bands on their bare arms, "Here's Tess at last! Where *have* you been?"

"Richards kept me in," Tess, who stood quite close to Jim, answered carelessly. She accepted a red band from one of the six, and the game, which had been stopped temporarily, was resumed.

From then on it was different. Tess could play basketball. Quick, clever, her slim body under perfect control, she seemed always in possession of the ball and always shooting baskets with deadly accuracy. Jim knew a real athlete when he saw one. He had never before noticed one among the girls. In three minutes she had captured his admiration and his heart. Forgetting his football suit, he stayed until the end of the game.

He knew Tess by name. She was a member of his class. The other fellows were united in the opinion that she was the prettiest girl in the school. "A trifle snippy at times, but a good little sport and sure a pippin for looks," ran the verdict. And Jim, not particularly interested, had hitherto tacitly accepted it as true.

Now, her smooth cheeks flushed with exercise and excitement, her fluffy brown hair pleasantly disheveled, and her lithe body showing to its full advantage in the abbreviated basketball suit, she seemed to him

the acme of grace and athletic proficiency. His glance remained on her as she walked toward the showers and locker-room, a little ahead of the others.

As she came near him, Jim, who had made a sudden decision and was visibly fussed, said as nonchalantly as he could manage it, "You're a great little basketballer, Tess."

Tess, the only one of the thirteen girls in the game who had not been aware of the presence of Marysville's famous athlete on the side-lines, turned to him with a sudden little start, recovered, and offered a characteristic retort. "Why, thanks. That's sure praise from Sir Hubert, Jim."

Jim blushed. But he doggedly returned to his purpose.

"I—I'm walking up your way, Tess. If you like, I'll wait till you dress and go up with you."

She looked at him in frank surprise, her piquant, slightly freckled nose finally crinkling humorously. Here was the beginning of a conquest indeed! As the recognized belle of the school, she had played around with the other boys, flirted with them with innocent pleasure and rapidly perfecting finesse, but up until now the famous Jim Hogan had never paid homage to her charms. She looked around at the other girls, wondering somewhat triumphantly if

they had heard. But he had spoken in a low tone, and they were busy talking among themselves.

Tess had long admired Jim for the same reason that Todd Harlan had early won her devotion. He could do things. Her violet-stippled eyes gazed at him now as frankly as a child's, and she answered, "All right, Jim. Back in ten minutes."

And she was.

### CHAPTER III

THE feeling that had taken root in the stalwart heart of young Jim Hogan and his ensuing predilection for Tess's company was customarily and slangily termed in Marysville high school circles a "crush." It was one of the unwritten social rules among the students that a recognized "crush" must never be put in jeopardy by the interference of a third party, particularly a "crush" that met with such general undergraduate approval as that of Marysville's favorite athlete and its prettiest girl.

In the weeks following their meeting in the gymnasium, Tess, who had at first accepted Jim's devotion in the manner of a careless young queen who has subdued an unusually stubborn subject, soon discovered there was a warmer strain within her that responded to his presence much as a spring flower drinks in the heat of the sun. Tess stumbled on the discovery that she was something more than a healthy young animal; she was becoming a woman.

Katherine McNair was soon forced to admit Jim Hogan into her scheme of things, though she protested at the regularity of his calls, advancing the



theory that Tess was quite too young to be devoting so much time and attention to one youth. But Miss McNair's niece had discovered that a ripple of laughter (which in Tess resembled sparkling water cascading over a very high rock) and a swift wrapping of her strong young arms around her aunt's wrinkled neck worked wonders in making that estimable lady change her mind and change it invariably to Tess's advantage.

Jim was quite sure, when June came around, that Tess would perish utterly if she did not attend the senior class dance which was to precede immediately the commencement exercises at which both of them were to receive their diplomas. Indeed she told him, with a glance that was not without its significance, that her aunt had yielded permission for her to go. And so, though he couldn't dance, he invited her to go with him. He was sure he was in for a hectic evening, and was not at all confident that his late father's tuxedo (which he customarily wore on state occasions) was worthy of such a charming creature as Tess. She, with difficulty, refrained from hugging him on the spot.

In moments of high exhilaration Tess had exchanged a few meaningless kisses with other boys. She was not a prude, though she by no means approved of the mauling and manhandling that some

of her schoolmates affected in the tonneaus of automobiles and the cockpits of sailboats and motorcraft on the sound.

“No, Freddie, I don’t go in for that stuff,” had been her casual answer to one amorous young Yale freshman who had been very ambitious with his arms in her own sailboat. And that, considering the decisive manner in which she said it, had then, as usual, been enough. Jim did not attempt to “pet” her, and, though she was uncertain whether or not she wanted him to, she liked him all the more because he didn’t.

Tess had danced at a few private parties not organized primarily for that purpose and the lively spirit of Nora McGuire, on such occasions, worked unconsciously within her to make her sensitive young body exult at the barbaric rhythm of “jazz.” But the senior dance, for which she as a member of the committee in charge had worked for almost a week, served to transform the rather cold-looking interior of Masonic Temple into a gay pastel pink-and-blue shrine of Terpsichore. And it was the first public occasion of the kind which she had ever attended.

Tess was as excited as a prospective bride. Excited, and, though intending to render Jim her full measure of devotion, a little apprehensive.

"I don't mind a bit that you don't dance, Jim," she assured him a few evenings before the momentous event. "I'll gladly sit out with you. But you won't care if I dance a little with other boys, will you? I'm simply crazy about dancing, you know."

Her soft mouth looked so wistful that at the moment he would gladly have exchanged all his gold footballs for the ability to "swing a mean pair of dogs," as, for instance, Scotty Trevor could.

"Oh, go ahead, Tess, dance all you like," was his final reply. "Have a good time. I'll find lots to do. And I wouldn't crab your fun for the world."

But of course, poor Jim didn't quite mean all he said.

And when, amid the gay throng of girls in their filmiest best and boys in immaculate "cake-eating togs" and the din of jazz from the band brought over from the county-seat and the benignly smiling chaperons on the side-lines, Jim glanced covertly away from the slightly constrained young lady he was "sitting it out" with on the two very hard wooden chairs he caught a glimpse of the gloriously happy and mysteriously radiant Tess smiling up into the face of Scotty Trevor as the latter maneuvered her so expertly through the crowd, Jim began to

suspect that dancing was one of the more important accomplishments known to man. He wondered if Scotty, a notorious "lady-killer," wasn't holding Tess a bit too tightly, if the flush that stained her smooth cheeks when Scotty brought her back to him was altogether due to the fact that the room was uncomfortably warm. She seemed to sense his thought.

"Won't you try to dance with me just once, Jim?" she begged him, somewhat too eagerly, when they were alone again. "I don't mind if you walk all over my shoes—truly I don't."

But Jim, stout-hearted as a lion in any other field of endeavor, did not feel equal to it. So he was obliged to spend most of the gala June night watching her slim body within the arms of moist-browed youths whom he surpassed in everything save the gentle art of synchronizing feet to music. The only occasions on which he snatched a word with Tess were between dances. Yet when he stood in the middle of a morosely jocular sentence an eager swain came hustling up for her. During the intermission, when they were two of twenty cooling their parched throats with ice-cream while their overheated bodies risked pneumonia by the only window through which a breeze was stirring, his sagging spirits rose again at the thought of her nearness.

As the festivities wore to a close around two in the morning and the chaperons were becoming sleepy and negligent and the dancers tired and careless, it seemed to Jim, who was the only wide-awake spectator-person present, that the bars of propriety were slightly wobbling. Hot cheek was pressed against hot cheek in certain quarters. Varieties of steps, practised in after-midnight cabarets but banned in Marysville, were making their appearance, goaded on by the apparently tireless orchestra from the county-seat.

Tess seemed to have succumbed to the general laxity. She had danced three times with Scotty Trevor, and that overly sophisticated young "jazz-hound" appeared to be enjoying the last one best of all. And so was Tess. A vague resentment took root in the breast of Jim Hogan. He didn't mind playing the rôle of wall-flower, and he wasn't selfish, but he couldn't help feeling that Tess was abandoning herself with just a little too much pleasure to the physical company of these other boys. He was rather glad and relieved when at last the band swung into *Home Sweet Home*, and a few moments later, Tess, flushed and tired-eyed but very happy and looking still adorable in her filmy evening cloak, was standing, her arm thrust intimately in his, out upon the crowded sidewalk calling good-bys to the others.

"Oh, I've had simply a gorgeous time, Jim," she bubbled ecstatically to him as they started walking the short distance to the McNair house.

He muttered a reply. He was still brooding. The whir of self-starters coming from the cars that many of the young blades had borrowed from their parents for the evening seemed to add to his discontent. Why didn't he have a car too? Tess seemed perfectly content to walk, but why did the others have all the things that girls like her seemed to require?

She noticed his preoccupation.

"Didn't you have a good time, Jim?" she ventured, glancing a little guiltily into his unnaturally glum face.

"Oh, sure," he said. But he said it without conviction.

An austere moon beamed calmly down upon them, and in the early morning silence the waters of the sound, stirred by the gentle breeze, made a queer little plopping noise down by the Harlan pier. He turned the key in the lock for her and then stepped back, looking at her intently. Never had he liked this lovely female creature, so filled with vibrant life, so deliciously feminine, as much as now, never had he desired—

She gazed at him, a questioning light in her shad-

owy eyes. Suddenly sweeping her into his strong arms, he, without quite knowing why, kissed her full upon the lips.

She uttered a stifled little cry of surprise. Releasing her almost as quickly as he had seized her, he stood confused, half frightened and half defiant. For an instant she kept her flushed face lowered so that he could not read it, and then, raising it, she looked at him squarely. Then she said quietly enough: "Jim, why did you do that?"

Her tone indicated neither acquiescence nor censure.

"I—I don't know," he confessed. "You're so pretty—and you know I like you—and the others had you all evening."

"You weren't jealous of—the others, were you, Jim?"

"No," he lied stoutly.

Her accustomed high spirits were returning.

"I'm entitled to a good time once in a while, I think."

"Well, I guess you had it—and I guess the fellows who danced with you did too."

"What do you mean, Jim?" Her voice was ominously steady.

He read the danger signal. He answered, "Nothing."

She liked Jim. She was not sure after all whether she was disappointed or not that he had kissed her. But though she was certain he was doing her an injustice in the implied reproof that had followed, she stood without the heart to start a quarrel with him. So she held out a cool, tanned little hand and said cheerfully, "Good night—and thank you."

For the first time in months, Tess did not sleep very well during what remained of darkness. She was wondering whether Jim was not, after all, right, whether her passion for dancing had not led her to permit a few petty liberties.

By the time the tottering old Methodist minister, who had been performing the same duty for twenty years, on a close June night, a week later, had handed them their diplomas with trembling fingers, and solemnly welcomed them out into the "wide, wide world" at the high school commencement exercises, Tess and Jim had already formed their separate plans for the future. Jim was mechanically inclined and nursed a secret yet stubborn longing to enter Boston Tech, had the family budget permitted it. But no such chance presented itself. So when he was offered a position in Hammer's Garage, in Marysville, as a substitute, he accepted it. Not that he intended to be contented with filling transient gasoline tanks, washing cars, and learning the rudi-





*A Paramount Picture.*

TESS RESENTED SELLING MARKED-DOWN MERCHANDISE.

*Manhandled.*



ments of the mechanics' trade, in which, from four summers of employment at Hammer's, he was already somewhat proficient. Jim had several "hunches" in the line of automobile accessories that he hoped to work out into successful and lucrative inventions.

Tess was to enter the normal school at Parksburg, fifteen miles inland, in the fall, not because she particularly desired to be a school-teacher, but because her Aunt Katherine had been urging it on and off for ten years. And, after all, it would be a change from Marysville and a chance to embark into a slightly different world.

Late that September, Jim drove one of Hammer's Fords with Tess and her aunt and the baggage through the crisp early morning sunshine and the scurrying yellow-stained leaves down to the station. None of the three said much, but even the emotionless face of Miss McNair was having a hard time maintaining its usual calm. Up until this moment, Tess had been breezy as a lark and had been thrilled by a trip to Boston to accumulate her wardrobe and as a reward for graduation. But it seemed now to have thoroughly dawned upon her that she was leaving the only home she had ever known and the protecting arms of the two people who cared most for her. And the occasion was a sobering one.

They stood rather pathetically together on the station platform. And then, two minutes before train time, Tess, making a sudden and tingling resolution, nudged Jim and he followed her softly around the corner where the trunks and boxes were piled concealingly high.

The eyes of Tess, so frequently mocking and mischievous and keen, were now subdued and shiny.

"I'll miss you, Jim," she told him softly, and one hand moved up to the lapel of his coat with the effect of a caress. For a moment they stood there in silence.

His handsome face looked very forlorn. So pathetically forlorn did it seem that she rose on tiptoe and with a graceful movement of swift abandon, flung her arms about him and kissed him—their first kiss since the impromptu one after the dance. Then she turned and walked quickly back to her aunt. Jim followed her, on air, wavering a little in his steps as the Parksburg train swung into the station.

As Katherine McNair, blowing her thin nose to conceal from Jim the true state of her feelings, was driven back to her empty house, she wondered if there was really something significant in the look of flushed understanding that had passed between Tess and young Hogan as the train pulled out.

## CHAPTER IV

“**I**N a battle of wits with our Tess,” languidly offered the bobbed-haired straw-blonde who was stretched leggily out on the window-seat, “I wouldn’t concede a mere man a chance, particularly a seedy old psychology prof like Haskell.”

“What was the row about, anyway?” asked the plump brunette with the tortoise-shelled glasses. She spoke from the depths of a slightly crippled Morris chair beside the littered study-table which occupied the center of the plainly furnished dormitory-room.

The third of the lounging trio, who was seated with her hands clasped about one crossed knee and was Tess’s roommate and the impromptu hostess of the moment, felt that question to be addressed to her. She started to answer, but stopped short as the door swung open and Tess herself entered.

“Well, ladies,” she called out buoyantly, “all gathered to sing my swan-song?”

“No, assembled to join in the triumphant chorus,” returned the blonde on the window-seat, who had done Tess the honor of pulling her lazy body up to a sitting position of attention.

"Tell us about it, my dear," came from Miss Tortoise-Shell.

The violet eyes of Tess, who seemed to have matured materially and to have grown slightly taller though not an ounce broader during her year and a half at Parksburg Normal, still held a glint of the exciting mischief inspired by her recent interview with Professor John Haskell.

"What is there to tell?" she countered with feigned innocence. "I'm not fired. Slightly reprimanded, to be sure, in Professor Doctor Haskell's most dignified and hurt manner. You were in 'psych' this morning. You saw him pounce upon me, and then demand that I show him my book. The rest was just the normal vanity of a man who sees his pet apple-cart upset."

"Oh, can that bunk, Tess," interrupted Claire Murdock, her roommate, "and tell us what really happened. These dirt-diggers are simply burning up with curiosity."

"All right—here's my story and I'm going to stick to it: You know Haskell's system. He has us read a couple of paragraphs from the book and then 'interpret' them, as the dear old granny calls it. And you also know he's slightly deaf and a perfectly rotten disciplinarian. And, to force us to pay attention, he's developed the disagreeable habit of call-

ing upon the ones who, he thinks, have their minds off the recitation and don't know the place, so that he can give them a nice fat zero when they fall down, plump!"

Tess paused a moment for breath.

"Well, I've simply been taking advantage of his system. I prepare only two paragraphs of the whole lesson. When the recitation reaches that point, I turn around and start whispering to somebody near me. 'Ah,' thinks Haskell, 'here's a victim!' 'Miss McGuire, recite please!' he barks. Up rises poor Tess, and does perfectly. And, of course, the old boy is sore as a boil. He's been watching me for months, and to-day I suppose he saw me make a mark in my book, which is my private way of keeping track of the place. So he thought he'd found something out. Whereupon the old bird asked to see my book, and then told me to come to his study at three this afternoon."

"How thrilling," murmured the window-seat lady, her tone in direct contradiction to her words. "And what did he say to you?"

"He started bawling me out, and I simply told him the truth. I told him it was a flat case of thief catching thief. I said I thought his system was unfair, and I considered myself justified in beating it if I could. 'And I *do*, too.'"

“You had your nerve with you,” commented the brunette, rising with some difficulty from the cushioned Morris chair. “But you’ve got all these men profs buffaloed, Tess—even old Haskell, the worst crab of the lot.”

Tess, who had tossed the disputed book into the vacated Morris chair and pushed back some of the litter on the table to make a place for herself beside her roommate, was still glowing with a slightly guilty self-satisfaction.

“Use your heads, my dears,” she bantered gaily, “and you can always beat the men.”

But when the others had gone, she slid from the table and, going to the window, gazed rather pre-occupiedly down upon the trim campus. She even sighed a little. Parksburg Normal was a strictly up-to-date institution as far as material equipment went, what with its broad, well-kept grounds and its modern light and airy work-buildings and its dormitories of native field-stone. Tess liked the girls, too. True, there was not one of them who inspired her with any mental brilliance or swayed her by any unusually colorful personality. Coming mostly from the farms and small towns of Connecticut, they were a wholesome, optimistic lot who for the most part were quite frank in admitting they did not intend to make pedagogy their career but con-



sidered it a convenient stop-gap between a teacher's license and marriage. And a much larger portion of their conversation was about men than about education.

Tess was popular enough among them. She was pretty, witty, even sharp-tongued at times, and she had a boundless energy. If they "kidded" her good-naturedly about the books of rather "highbrow" character that she had read for pleasure and if they chided her about the drawing-board and crayons and box of paints that she used assiduously in odd moments, their criticism was not without its alloy of admiration. Tess was different. Tess was far too attractive, they agreed, to become a school-teacher, and there were prophecies that some man would gobble her up before she had taught her first class. The few men who came into her rather conventual life as a student at Parksburg, however, did not, any of them, seem to have made any discernible impression on her.

Tess, still gazing out of the window, at length turned to her roommate, who was regarding her own finger-nails and pondering if she should take them down to the one manicure-shop in town and give them an expensive treat.

"Claire, what are you going to make out of your life anyway?" was Tess's unexpected question.

Claire looked up in surprise, though she was by this time used to Tess's abrupt and incongruous queries.

"Oh, teach school a while and then marry some nice man with more money than brains, I suppose," she answered.

"And you'll be satisfied with that?"

"I guess I'll have to be." Claire sighed indifferently at her sad fate.

"I won't."

Young Miss Murdock regarded her with some curiosity.

"What will *you* do about it, Birdie?"

Tess's small chin was set firmly and her eyes narrowed a bit. She was looking much further than she could possibly see across the Parksburg campus, and she seemed almost oblivious of her room-mate.

"I could never be satisfied as a school-teacher, nor as a housewife with a forty-two waist-line and a pack of children. There's something in me that calls for more than that. If only I could get a chance on the stage or at painting, or something! Some day I'm going to New York and try. If I'm beaten, all right—I'll have had my chance."

She had never before revealed herself thus openly to her roommate. There was everything about jolly, empty-headed, pleasure-loving Claire to invite

the lightsomeness that was so integral a part of Tess's nature, rather than fertilize the serious ambition that was underneath.

Tess looked at Claire a moment with eyes brightened by the emotions that her own words had conjured up. Then she added carelessly, "Let's go down to town and get a sundae."

Claire was regarding her curiously and asked, "Don't you like it here, Tess?"

"Oh, yes. I've had a jolly time, but I'm not sorry we're finishing in three months."

"I dare say girls who stay home have a lot more fun than we do," Claire opined.

"Undoubtedly. There's not much joy about learning to be an old-maid school-teacher, old girl." Tess stretched her slim arms and yawned. "I don't know what's the matter with me. But I'm just about dying for a touch of excitement of some sort. If only some young Lochinvar would come dashing in from the West at this moment! I guess he could carry me away with about two pounds of salted pecans and two seconds of persuasion."

Claire calculated an instant. She walked over and slipped on to the window-seat close to Tess.

"I'm sneaking out to-night and motoring down to Cresswell to the movies with Fred Blake. It wouldn't gum the game if you came along. I can

phone Fred to get another man when we walk down to town."

She waited, expectantly hopeful.

Tess laughed. It was against the rules for the girls to leave the campus after dark without permission, but Claire was such a chronic lawbreaker that Tess saw nothing extraordinary in her proposal,—except that ordinarily Claire's fellow-conspirators, mostly raw-boned, awkward-tongued farmer boys, did not interest her. But the Parksburg routine for several months, and particularly the recent childish exhibition by the learned Professor Haskell, had been rasping Tess's sensitive nature toward rebellion. Making a resolution that was almost as surprising to herself as it was to Claire, she spiritedly replied, "All right, I'm with you."

And, once committed to the escapade, she walked down to the village in high spirits with Claire and listened outside the open door of the telephone-booth vaguely stirred by Claire's end of the conversation with the invisible Fred. Returning to her room in a spirit of oddly smoldering excitement, she donned the most festive of her informal gowns.

They met the boys where the Dodge sedan was parked in the shadow just outside the campus gate. Tess was introduced and assisted into the tonneau by her escort, while Claire snuggled in beside Fred

Blake at the wheel. Fred, of whom Tess had been hearing tales for months, was, she decided at once, a dud. He was a moist blond with pale blue eyes and an uninteresting face beaten red by his daily toil on his father's fruit-farm, located just outside Parksburg. His rather weak chin supported the sullen mouth of a spoiled only child, and he seemed content to reply in monosyllables to Claire's animated chatter as they slid through Parksburg and along the macadam road leading to Cresswell.

Tess's seat-mate, whose name she had caught as Walter Hovey, was a dark, more sophisticated type. Young Blake's car, probably from the rough treatment it habitually received, squeaked and bumped considerably, and conversation was not easy. Nevertheless, in five minutes, Tess's escort, who seemed to be crowding her a little more than was necessary with his heavily overcoated body, managed in a nasal voice to let her know that he was the new assistant teller at the Parksburg Bank, that he considered Parksburg a "one-horse dump" and Tess a very attractive girl, and that New York was really the only town equal to a man of his caliber and jazz-hounding abilities. Tess was at first mildly disgusted by his obvious conceit and his increasing attempts at familiarity, then amused and inclined to egg on his exercises in self-esteem.

The noisy quartette covered the five miles to Cresswell at a pace far in excess of the law and, succeeding in edging the car into the last remaining inch of parking-space beyond the brightly lighted square, waited in the lobby of the movie theater, and were regaled by Hovey with spirited accounts of the last musical comedy he had seen on Broadway, while Fred stood in line to buy tickets for the second show. Tess would have enjoyed the picture, a Gloria Swanson society-drama, and shared Claire's rapturous remarks about the star's elaborate wardrobe, had Walter Hovey kept his obtrusive knees and his wandering hands more to himself. But Tess was not in a mood to be critical. She felt sure of her ability to handle this smart young expatriated New Yorker, if need be.

"How about something to eat and drink?" Fred asked as they were streaming out after the show.

"We'll stop at the Kenilworth," said Hovey, apparently taking charge of the party. Claire glanced at Fred and seemed about to protest. She knew the Kenilworth from first-hand experience. Tess had never been there. But she had heard of the rather doubtful reputation of that unpretentious wooden hostelry, which they had passed about half a mile from Cresswell on their way in.

"I really think we should be getting back," she

advanced mildly to Claire. The exhilaration of the wind-lashed ride and the vivacious stuff she had been seeing upon the screen were not without their effects.

“Oh, we can stop just a minute,” persuaded Claire. And Tess, who had not had a meal outside the Parksburg Normal dining-hall for several months, gave doubtful assent.

Seated in the garish and almost deserted dining-hall of the Kenilworth, she pretended no surprise and said, “No, thank you,” when Hovey, having held a whispered conversation with the fat, hard-eyed head-waiter at the door, whispered, “Do you girls want something to drink?”

Claire refused the offered potion also. The two boys elaborately drained two vitriolic cocktails from teacups, and the quartette nibbled at shabby club sandwiches, though Walter, warmed already by the liquor, protested that there were lots better items on the menu.

Tess was becoming a bit uneasy as their escorts, having finished their food, drained another highball apiece, particularly as Blake, who had to drive the car, while much quieter than Walter, was evidently less used to stimulants and more affected by them.

“It’s time to go now,” Tess at length rose and announced.

"Oh, don't crab the party," Hovey protested. "We're just getting acquainted." He attempted to seize her hand and draw her down into her chair again, but she eluded his slightly unsteady grasp.

Claire, who, Tess had observed, was openly devoted to Fred and seemed on intimate enough terms with him, apparently saw nothing to be concerned about. When Tess insisted on setting the party into motion, however, Claire, who was used to submitting to her roommate's stauncher personality, looked up from her low-voiced tête-à-tête with the now red-faced Fred and acquiesced.

"Tess is right. We'll have to run along." And so, their slightly muddled young gallants muttering protests, they walked out into the nipping air to where the car was parked.

No sooner had Fred whirred the starter and bounced out into the main road than Tess perceived that she had rather a problem on her hands. That problem was Walter.

"Oh, come on, can't you be nice to me?" he urged as she slid away from his ambitious arms. Claire in the front seat had removed her hat and was resting her close-cropped straw-colored head upon Fred's shoulder, which did not materially assist his driving.

"Don't be silly," Tess told Walter. She spoke



sharply, and, because his alcohol-flavored breath was scenting up the stuffy air within the car, she tugged at the window and lowered it a little, refusing his clumsy attempt to reach over her and help.

He laughed unpleasantly.

"Heard the story of the girl who was so nice, and had to walk home from so many automobile rides, that her mother gave her a road-map for Christmas?" he derided, and laughed again.

"Perhaps she found the walking more pleasant," rejoined Tess.

"Though colder."

"A little cold air certainly wouldn't do us any harm."

And as he reached determinedly for her, she thrust two hard little fists into his chest and pushed him away, pushing him away with a strength that he probably could not imagine existed in her slim firm body.

She was thoroughly aroused now.

"You sit down there and behave yourself," she snapped. "I'm not going to be mauled, and you might as well make the best of it. It'll only last a half-hour."

But deep within her she could not help admitting to herself that there was something not unattractive about a man's arm reaching for her in the warm

dark. If he had been somebody else, Jim perhaps, she would likely have permitted him to fondle her, and might even have responded.

However, she had but an instant to play with this thought, for in the next the head-lights of another car swooped down upon them, Fred's machine lurched so violently to the right as to fling her nearly into Walter's lap, and a series of sharp bumps amid screeching metal sent the sedan almost into the ditch.

They had sideswiped the other machine, though Fred did not stop to see what damage had been done either to his own car or the stranger's. He followed Walter's husky injunction to "step on it" and went racing on into the pitch-black night. Claire stared back with white, frightened face at Tess, then hesitantly crouched down into the seat again.

Tess now knew that Fred, undoubtedly made reckless by the unaccustomed liquor, presented a greater danger than Walter. In her preoccupation with her amorous escort, she had not noticed the speed they had been making and the crazy way they were wallowing from one side of the road to the other. But now a black tree sped by not a foot from her nose, and Fred every minute seemed to be pressing farther down upon the accelerator.

"I'll show your friend how the old 'bus can travel," she heard him mutter to Claire, and he

caused Tess's heart to lose another beat as he removed one arm from the wheel and circled Claire's shoulder with it.

Tess wondered how soon they would be crossing the Sheldon Pike, one of the most traveled thoroughfares of the county. As if in answer, a pair of head-lights flashed suddenly just ahead and to the left. Slowing down not one whit, Fred flashed his car across the intersecting macadam, seemingly right into the blazing glow of the other car, which had reached the cross-roads at the same instant. An emergency brake screamed, and Tess heard the shout and caught a glimpse of the horrified face of the man in the braked runabout as they whisked by, clearing his radiator by an inch. Unconsciously she had reached forward and gripped the rug-rod with clenched hands, set for the crash.

Recovering, she now called out sharply to Fred, "Slow down!" It was time, she thought grimly, to assume command. If this sort of thing went on it meant an accident, and an accident meant they might all be hurt or killed. And at the best the school authorities would discover Claire's and her own infraction of the rules against leaving their room at night without permission. And she, for one, had no wish to risk expulsion for the sake of two such duds as Fred and Walter.

When Fred answered by piling on more speed, Tess, now thoroughly aroused, leaned forward, shook him and commanded, "Stop the car, you blithering idiot!"

There was something about that imperiously contemptuous voice that struck tinder in the befogged brain of the farmer boy. He finally obeyed.

Bringing the car to a gradual standstill by the side of the wooded road, he turned stupidly about and asked, "Wassa matter?"

Tess snapped on the light inside the sedan and soon saw from his blurred eyes that her interference was sufficiently justified. But, deciding now that diplomacy was the best policy, she stifled her anger and said pleasantly enough, "You and Fred sit back here, Claire. I'll drive for a change."

Fred turned blankly to Claire, "Wassa idea? I can drive good enough."

"Certainly you can," Tess prevaricated invitingly, "but wouldn't you like to come back here where it's more comfortable?"

"Yes, come on, Fred," urged Claire, upon whom Tess's idea began to dawn.

And so, Hovey dissenting, the change was made, and Tess, who during her vacations had been taught to drive several makes of cars by Jim Hogan, first assistant at Hammer's Garage, assumed the wheel

and brought the party at sensible speed and without incident to the main gate of the school.

When, having been secretly admitted to the dormitory by previous arrangement with a chum, they had gained their room and were undressing in the dark, Claire asked, "How did you like Fred, Tess?"

"Fred is a fathead," Tess answered with heat and conviction.

The usually mild and acquiescing Claire bristled.

"He's not as much of a fathead as your smart-aleck Walter."

"My Walter? Oh, my dear, have a heart." Tess was rather proud of the command she had taken of the evening and inclined to lord it a bit.

"Well, he blew you to the show and the supper," said Claire. "You might have been nice to him instead of snapping him off as you did. You can't expect men to take you out if you don't treat them right."

"Is that your system?" sniffed Tess. "If it is, it's a pretty rotten one. I don't propose to be manhandled by anybody I don't like. And I'm no prude, either." And, slipping under the cold sheet of the twin bed, she was almost instantly sleeping the sleep of the young, the beautiful and the conscience-clear.

Three days later, Tess dashed up to her room between classes, to find a note in Claire's writing rest-

ing upon the book which she needed for her next recitation.

Good-by, Tess dear. Fred and I are driving to New London to be married this afternoon. Give my love to the rest of the girls and tell them.

CLAIRE.

Poor, foolish, romantic Claire! Married to that lout of a farmer boy. Tess stared blankly at the hastily scrawled paper. Her feeling was a mingling of pity for Claire and hurt pride that she hadn't been consulted. She recalled the first time she had seen the new Mrs. Blake, in the registry office of the school, where Claire, a helpless novice from a small town in southern Connecticut, had seemed about to burst into tears over the complexities of filling out entrance-papers and choosing courses. Tess, by chance next to her, had helped her, conversed at length with the shy simple stranger, and then, because she had to find a roommate and judged Claire to be easy to get along with, and, perhaps also because we always enjoy associations with our inferiors in character and mind rather than with our superiors, suggested they share quarters.

She pictured Claire as the wife of Fred. Long monotonous days on a fruit-farm, with occasional forays in to the movies at Cresswell, when the roads of that barren rural region weren't blocked with

mud or snow; three meals a day with that red, uninspiring, prematurely aged face of his across the table.

Tess sighed. Well, it was not for her, Tess McGuire. She needed color and occasional excitement. She would insist upon at least a try at the bustling roar of big city life. She could, she felt, become a successful actress, for instance, if the opportunity were given her. And certainly there would be a market for the products of her facile pencil and brush, which the drawing-instructor at Normal and all her friends had esteemed quite extraordinary. She could never be content as a school-teacher in a town like Marysville. There was a restless something that kept gnawing at her, especially now that spring was coming after the bleak New England winter. This vague something made her long to break the chains of nineteen eventless years. It subordinated Aunt Katherine and Jim Hogan and all her past to a position of small importance compared with the crying need of giving the real Tess McGuire a chance to live, live, live!

That afternoon, in the midst of an animated, half-envious, half-cynical discussion of Claire's elopement, carried on by her best friends seated on what was until that day Claire's bed, Tess stooped down to pick up the letter that had just been

thrust through her mail-slot. She discovered that it was from Jim. It was in his usual direct, almost impersonal style, and its important news hinged on the message that his mother had suffered another heart-attack and was very seriously ill. Though making an obvious attempt not to pass along his trouble to Tess, Jim revealed, in the few lines in which he described his mother's misfortune, a deep concern over the outcome.

Tess was moved. She knew pale little Mrs. Hogan slightly, and Jim's unfailing devotion to his mother was one of his attractions.

While the others chattered like gay magpies over a fresh worm, she stood absorbedly near the window and thought of Jim. Marysville had already accepted them as sweethearts. She spent most of her vacations with him, and they exchanged letters two and three times a week. Good old Jim! Their high-school affair had ripened and deepened and, in her present course, some day she would probably marry him. *In her present course.* She unconsciously lifted her head, and her strong young body tautened.

Well, was she going to keep on in her present course? Wasn't marrying Jim just about the same as Claire marrying Fred? He was just a mechanic in a Marysville garage, with little chance of even owning the business, for his employer was a com-



paratively young man and Jim could save nothing of importance from his small-town salary. Unless, of course, some of the inventions upon which he was always working should bear fruit. Which was a long chance.

“Why so pensive, Tess—envying your roomy?” came a bantering voice from the bed. Tess tossed her head, as if to banish her thoughts with the movement, laughed, and joined them. . . .

A month later, after Jim’s letters for several weeks had seemed to indicate that his mother was recovering what passed, with her, for good health, word was unexpectedly sent to Tess, while she was preparing to go down to the dining-hall for the evening meal, that a visitor was awaiting her in the reception-room at the main building. Wondering who it could be, and in the sudden fear that something had happened to her aunt, she hurried over and found Jim standing there, white, tired-eyed, and dressed soberly in black. His appearance checked her exuberant greeting, and she drew him silently away from the ugly oaken desk, behind which the owl-eyed instructress on duty regarded them curiously. The two moved slowly over to a settee. Jim’s husky frame sank gratefully down into the cushion in a huddled way that was not at all usual with him.

“My mother died a week ago,” he said slowly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” and involuntary tears welled into her violet eyes.

“I sold our place. I felt I couldn’t stay there a minute without her,” he went on, groping heavily and pathetically for her understanding, and at last finding it. “I didn’t want even to stay in Marysville. So I threw up my job, and I’m going to New York. Frank Hammer—he’s been pretty decent to me—wrote to a friend of his and got me a place there at the same kind of work I was doing for him. I realized a little money out of the house, and I’m on my way now. But first I thought you’d like to know.”

“Of course,” Tess said gently. She rose and spoke to the sharp-eyed woman behind the desk. The latter pursed her lips an instant, studied the black-clad Jim, and then nodded. Tess came back and took Jim by the hand. “Let’s go out where we can talk.”

They walked out into the star-lit campus, down the white-graveled paths lined with shrubbery blossoming with spring. He was going to New York, was the thought that went surging through her brain.

“I’ve half a mind to pack my bag and go with you!”

She broke their silence suddenly. He needed her now. And he was going to New York, the city of her dreams.

"You couldn't do that," he protested. "Gee, Tess, you couldn't, though the thought of it makes me almost crazy. But you'll graduate here in a month."

"I know," she sighed. "And I'll go back to Marysville." Then in sudden heat, "But I won't be resigned to teaching school. I won't! Some day soon I'll join you. I'll come to New York, too. And you must help me to convince Aunt Katherine, Jim."

They sat upon a rustice bench, over which the fragrance of lilac hung almost oppressively sweet, and argued over it for a crowded hour, without definite decision. He did not like the idea. He had the countryman's prejudice against the metropolis. *He* was strong, *he* could survive. But the city would tarnish her.

"I am strong too, Jim," she cried, her bright eyes agleam and looking far beyond him. "I could make good, I know."

When he left her to hurry to his train, she reached up her arms and lips to his haggard face and kissed him, and her kiss was neither wholly sympathy nor wholly love.

## CHAPTER V.

THE young kindergarten-teacher in the Marysville Public School sighed with mingled weariness and relief. She had seen those of her small charges whose guardians called for them, at the close of the school-day, safely into piloting hands, with a pleasant smile from her rather tired eyes for each of the older people. She had started the unchaperoned urchins of her flock auspiciously on their way with a word of warning about letting Pete the Policeman pilot them across Main Street. And now, having regained her desk, she sank into her squeaky swivel-chair with a second relieved sigh, and with deft little movements of her fingers pushed back from her damp forehead straying locks of her reddish-brown bobbed head.

The barnlike, but blithely decorated kindergarten-room was bathed in the June mid-afternoon sun, slanting in through the open windows, which seemed to be admitting phantasmal heat-waves rather than an actual breeze. Even the ivy clinging to the bricks was ominously still. It was very hot for June.

Tess had fought a valiant but a losing battle with the unknown New England architect guilty of that school-room, in her effort to brighten up a structure innately lugubrious. Its interior now resembled the remnants of a children's party, given for a youngster of five, after the last guest had left. The long tables were littered with pieces of varicolored paper, as was also a large section of the floor. The low chairs were helter-skelter. Dust specks danced in the shafts of sunlight. The children had been engaged in cutting paper dolls during the long, early summer afternoon, and the debris remained.

Aside from the brightly-hued paper, the only other spots of color in the brown-stained room were the geranium boxes in the windows and the two deep red roses on Tess's desk.

She idly fingered the stem of one of the roses. Then, leaning back and rubbing her weary eyes with the heels of her hands, she sat upright again, sighed once more, and reached into a drawer of her desk for her report-book. Opening it, she dug into the ink-well with her pen and in a neatly pointed script started to fill out her monthly records.

She was a little worried about her eyes. Another year of this, and she was quite sure she would be wearing glasses. That, she felt, would stand the first sign of her subjugation to her profession.

Tess had taken the kindergarten-course at the normal school because she had imagined starting very small children aright upon the path of education would be more interesting than teaching their older and more intractable brothers. Aunt Katherine, from her own experience, had agreed with her and had assisted in securing for her the appointment to the vacancy in the kindergarten department of the Marysville School. Miss McNair was naturally delighted to have her niece home with her again. The two years without her had not been without their aspects of desolation. Tess herself would have preferred an assignment in a larger, newer school somewhere else, but, largely because she secretly regarded her school-teaching as only a temporary occupation until she found her bearings, she had yielded.

And life had settled into a quiet monotonous routine which, with the end of the school-year only a month away, had been more and more getting on her nerves. The children were dear little things, to be sure. But they were helpless little things, as well, and very often troublesome in the extreme.

Tess wondered if she was selfish in disliking her work, in desiring life for herself instead of burying herself in the task of preparing others for life, envying Jim his struggle with the teeming roar that is

New York. Though his letters at times spoke so discouragingly of the hardness and sordidness and false glamour of the city of her dreams, she longed to test it for herself.

She poised her pen in mid-air and thought of him now. He was coming to her to-morrow for a flying week-end visit, their first reunion since Christmas time. She sat faintly disturbed by the fact that she was not looking forward to his coming with keener pleasure. Jim was a small-town boy born and bred, she decided. City-life held no allure for him. Instead of regaling her with the accounts of the theaters and cabarets and operas that she longed to hear about, he was continually congratulating her upon being out of it all, seeking, apparently, to persuade her how much more fortunate she was to be where roses bloomed and life ran quietly.

Jim was a dear boy but—

Her eyes were suddenly blinded by a pair of big warm hands closing over them from behind. She started with the unexpectedness of it. Then she smiled. She knew those strong calloused palms.

“You’re early, Jim,” she laughed in delighted surprise. He had seen her from the open door, tiptoed in, and chosen that naive manner of greeting her. He dropped his hands to her shoulders, swung her bruskiy around and, stooping, kissed her.

"I had a chance to get away this morning, and you bet I took it," he chuckled. His strong face was more serious and pale from his work indoors, but otherwise he was the same big, husky, safe Jim.

He drew a chair to her desk, took the pen from her, and seized both of her hands, still inarticulately overjoyed to see her.

"Golly, it was hot back there in New York," he exuded.

"Not much better here," she protested.

"Not in this hot-house of a room, maybe. But aren't you through for the day? I went up to your aunt's house from the station. But she said you were still here. Chuck it, can't you, and let's get out in the air."

"You'll have me fired, Jim," she bantered. But she closed her overgrown book and replaced it in the drawer. Then, looking very cool in her neat blue Jersey suit with the crisp white collar, in comparison with Jim's train-worn clothes and train-gritted countenance, she stood up and announced, "O. K."

They conversed animatedly as they walked up shady Main Street, where it was comparatively cool. A block up the street they came upon the sound of busy hammers originating within a vacant lot, fenced off with crudely stretched white canvas. Several automobiles were parked at the curb near



the entrance in this cloth barrier, and perspiring men were unloading their miscellaneous contents and carrying them inside. A small-sized ferris-wheel towered up modestly from within the white. Shouts, rattling boards and a scene of confused animation echoed out of them.

“They’re holding the Firemen’s Carnival early this year,” Jim commented, and stopped to shake hands with a swarthy, dumpy little man weighted down by a canvas-covered contrivance that looked suspiciously like a roulette-wheel. Several other men recognized Jim and stopped, and soon he was holding a miniature reception.

“Coming to the opening of the carnival to-night, ain’t you, folks?” inquired one. “Bigger an’ better than ever—dancin’ with a band from New London, games of skill and chance and everythin’.”

“We’ll be there, John,” Tess laughed, with a quick consulting glance at Jim. “We’ll show this city fellow what a real good time is like.”

Jim might have protested after dinner that he was tired and that he would much rather spend the evening with her alone, both of which objections would have been perfectly true. Refreshed somewhat with the swim they had taken together, during which she proved to her secret delight that she could still duplicate all of Jim’s diving feats, and even give

him a good tussle in a sprint, he sat smoking his pipe between the contented and silent Miss McNair and Tess for a grateful hour out on the broad veranda. A gentle breeze was stirring across the flower-scented lawn from the direction of the sound. A million stars blinked peacefully above. To Jim, fresh from the din of the city, it was a scene of utter contentment, needing only the presence of his mother there to make it complete. He could not imagine why Tess should not be entirely satisfied.

"Todd Harlan and a party drove in to the Harlans' in an automobile while you were swimming," announced Miss McNair.

"He did?" Tess was interested at once. "I haven't seen Todd for five years. What did he look like, Aunt Kit?"

"I didn't get a good look at him. But they were very lively. Three men in the car."

Tess looked over at the big Harlan house, unusually aglow from cellar to roof with light. Mr. and Mrs. Harlan were getting quite old now and as a rule, did very little entertaining. Todd, she understood, had married one of his own class, a rich young society woman prominent in New York. He was in the Stock Exchange in Wall Street. Tess, remembering that, felt she would like to see him again.

"Perhaps we'll meet them at the carnival," she admitted aloud. Already the syncopation of "the band from New London" was coming clearly up to them. "You won't mind if we go down for a while, will you, Aunt Kit? Come on, Jim, I'll show you some real Marysville excitement!"

If there was a tinge of sarcasm in her voice, mingled with recklessness, Jim did not notice it. She seized his hand, feigning to drag him from his chair with a mimic grimace of strained effort, and, laughing, he rose and made his adieu to Miss McNair. He seemed to be looking for something, and Tess cried, "Oh, you don't need your hat here. You're not in New York." And they were off.

All Marysville, and many of the neighboring towns, seemed to have congregated within the canvased acre of flooding light that spelled the opening of the Firemen's Carnival. Cars were parked the length of Main Street, on both sides, and more were coming. The band crashed out a merry din, and summery-clad couples swayed to the barbaric music on the wooden dance-platform. Crowds swarmed around the various booths, where games of chance for prizes flourished openly. A brightly polished sedan automobile, which was to be raffled off at the end of the carnival, was a center of attraction. Chattering, drinking "soft pop" and crunching pea-

nuts, munching "hot dogs" and spending money in what for the country is a reckless manner, the crowds mulled around in high glee.

The cares of the class-room seemed to slip from Tess's slim shoulders with the purchase of her admission ticket. She succumbed immediately to the festival spirit of the hour. She knew the carnival was crude and elementary, but she longed to have a good time, and this was the best substitute at hand.

"Oh, there's Todd!" she cried, after they had been there about half an hour, and pointed over the intervening heads to a trio of men who were just entering. Wearing natty golf-suits and expensive sport-shirts and cravats of a shade hitherto unknown in Marysville, it did not need the amused sophisticated look of their sleek-shaved faces to proclaim them of New York. At almost the same instant that Tess indicated him to Jim, Todd saw her. With an exclamation of pleasure Todd turned to his companions and said something to them. Then he led the way as quickly as possible through the crowd to Tess.

"Todd, you know Jim Hogan, of course," she said, frankly delighted. But in her pleasure at seeing Todd there was a small mixture of disappointment at his appearance. He was not the smooth-muscled well-built Todd he had been when he first

graduated from college. His face had fattened, even coarsened a little. There was the suspicion of a paunch beginning around his belt. One can not keep in continual training for four years and then abandon it for Wall Street, society dances, midnight-to-morning cabarets, lobster and boot-leg liquor and expect to retain either the figure of an Adonis or the austerity of an anchorite.

Todd introduced his friends, both New York men of about his own age. Bob Nesbitt was almost identical in build with Todd, except that he had a mop of unruly black, curly hair, and, as Jim later objected, "spoke in bunches." The other man, Draper Brenon, was tall and rather sinister-looking. Rings of dissipation darkened his tired black eyes, set too close to his straight prominent nose, through which he talked with rather an air of superciliousness. When introduced to Tess, he held her hand and looked at her keenly, as a sportsman regards a blooded horse. He made her vaguely uneasy.

"We're over from New London," Todd explained. "I came up from town expecting to spend the week-end with friend wife, who's at the Griswold. But I found she'd deserted me for a yachting party. So I lured these two sad bachelors from the golf-links and dumped them into the car for a jaunt over to see that old uncle of mine."

Tess wondered if she could be mistaken in seeming to detect a note of irritation in Todd's pleasant voice as he spoke of his wife's unexpected absence. And she was quite sure he had miscalled Draper Brenon a bachelor, for the account of the latter's recent rather sensational divorce from his wife had reached even the Marysville paper.

Todd inquired appropriately of Jim regarding his affairs. Jim seemed rather out of it in the face of this polished competition. And even more so when Todd turned to Tess and asked, "Well, Skipper, do we dance?"

"We do," she cried, glancing swiftly at Jim but hardly heeding his nod of confirmation.

It seemed to Tess, as Todd swung her up to the low platform, that she had been longing all her life to dance. It was wonderful. The band was pouring a tingling, moaning fox-trot into the warm June air. Todd was an excellent dancer, and if he gripped her a little tightly, it was probably because he was used to New York cabarets where there isn't much room.

Tess returned to the others, after the dancers had encored the band nearly to exhaustion, flushed and delighted.

Nesbitt and Brenon, carrying on a desultorily polite conversation with Jim, had been watching this

strikingly pretty country girl and their friend closely during the dance. She was a regular pippin, they decided separately, wholly desirable. And she could dance like a sun-tanned dryad.

“School-teaching hasn’t cramped your style, Skipper,” Todd laughed. Then turning with a slightly proprietorial air to the others, “Miss McGuire and I are old pals. Fact is, we still hold the mixed doubles swimming-championship of Long Island Sound.”

“That must have been before you won the mixed drinking championship of Longacre Square,” Brenon jibed, not altogether good-naturedly.

And Todd’s smile was clouded with a sudden warning frown.

When the music started again, they waited for Jim to ask for the next dance. But poor Jim was as footbound as ever. He longed for a pretext on which to take Tess away from them. But he was afraid she wouldn’t come, even if he found that pretext.

“Do we dance, Miss McGuire?” Nesbitt mimicked Todd. And they did. Not quite so evenly as in the first dance, and she wondered what some of the elderly watchers, whom she caught glimpses of as Nesbitt whirled her about, thought of the ultra-modern dips and other contortions he was subjecting

her to. Marysville was very staid upon the subject of dancing, she knew. But a reckless mood had taken possession of her. She was so tired of being prim and stodgy, and Todd and his friends, with their glib tongues and self-assured manners, seemed a part of that outer freer world to which she longed to migrate.

Brenon, long and graceful as a professional, claimed his dance next. He pressed her close to him until her brown head rested nearly under his sharp chin, and they moved as one body to an insidiously physical fox-trot. She had never danced with any one half as expert as Brenon, or half as dangerous. Something was going to her head, like wine. Her cheeks were hot, and she was an instant recovering control of her tongue as the dance ended and they rejoined the other men. She did not want to look at Jim, knowing he must be disapproving. She tossed her head a little in bravado. She wanted to dance some more, to dance all night, always!

"You're a wonder, Skipper," proclaimed Todd. And he meant it. "You've got any deb I ever trotted with skinned, and Draper here, who's New York's champion parlor-snake, is nuts on you, too. Am I right, Drape?"

"Where have you been hiding her, Todd?" drawled Brenon. "I've a sneaking idea your uncle



wasn't the only attraction that brought you to Marysville, eh?"

He seemed to take pleasure in knowing this hurt Jim.

Then they danced some more—first Todd, then Nesbitt, and eventually Brenon with the light in his eyes she didn't trust. And she could not realize that she had been keeping Jim standing there, a rather impatient wall-flower, for nearly two hours, when at last she came back to earth sufficiently to know that the time was midnight and they must go home.

"Old-fashioned swimming party at noon to-morrow," were Todd's last words as they left.

Once more in the cool shadows of upper Main Street and away from the intoxication of the music, she turned to Jim, frankly apologetic. She was surprised that he seemed more disturbed at her actions for her own sake than for any slight that she might have offered him.

## CHAPTER VI

THEY swam off the Harlan pier on Sunday afternoon, blithely disregarding Miss McNair's strict views on Sabbath athletics. Tess saw one of her idols crumbling at the base when Todd refused to imitate her double somersault dive.

"I'm too ancient to risk my neck at that stunt any more, Skipper!" He sought to laugh it off, but he was quite serious. She had a queer feeling of time slipping away from her. She was only twenty. But wasn't she getting on fearfully fast? Todd Harlan, too old to do double front flip, sleek-limbed Todd with the muscles of steel that used to ripple as he walked out to the end of the board. But sleek-limbed Todd no longer, alas. Physically New York had not done so well with the swimming instructor and the idol of her youth.

"Todd's like all these star strong-boys when they slack off," drawled Draper Brenon's lazy voice at her side. He had settled down near where she was dangling her white legs over the side of the pier, and was languidly fishing a crumpled cigarette out of his sweater pocket. Evening clothes would suit his tall, rather bumpy figure better than bathing

trunks, she decided. He shot the match into the water and continued, "However, I'd rather lose my figure than bury myself in a town like this. Lord knows what a pippin like you can be doing tucked away up here in the woods."

She did not fancy the prolonging look he gave her out of his narrow dark eyes, nor did she like the rather contemptuous way he spoke of his host. But his last words, oddly enough, were in line with her own secret thoughts. Why *was* she tucked away in the woods?

After a heavy New England dinner, she and Jim went sailing in her sporty little sloop. Lolling in the sun-drenched cockpit, with Jim at the rudder, she waved to Todd and his guests, who were putting on the Harlan's clock golf-green. Then they were out in the clean blue waters of the sound. Even though a quartette of yachts rode, sparkling white and graceful as birds, a half-mile away, and, nearer by, a trio of stubby barges were swashing down the channel behind a puffy and presumptuous tug, they were alone as completely as if lost in the Canadian wilds.

"Do you like Todd and his friends, Jim?" she asked him, because she was really curious to know.

"Harlan and Nesbitt are all right, I guess," he answered.

"You don't think so much of Draper?" She used Brenon's first name, he noticed, and winced a little.

"Well, I don't know him well enough to say, of course, but that guy doesn't seem to me to have honest eyes. And he's too fresh. He's the kind of fellow you see hanging around the New York cabarets. Too much money, and nothing to do but spend it. [The women fall for him, I guess, and he knows it. What they call on Broadway a 'smooth worker.'"] He seemed to be warming up to his subject. "That's the trouble with New York and a girl, Tess. It's a man's city. Girls get along, but they're dependent on men for almost everything, whether it's business or pleasure. Brains in girls don't go far on Broadway. Pretty faces go further, but New York men like Draper aren't content very long to give much in return for just pretty faces, either. I don't say it's impossible for girls to stay clean there and win success. But where there's so much dirt, the chances of getting soiled are pretty darned good!"

She looked at him with wide eyes of interest.

"Do you think *I* could win success without being soiled?" she asked.

His grave blue eyes locked with hers momentarily, as if he were inquiring whether she wanted the truth. He decided she did.

"I honestly don't know," he surprised and hurt her by saying. "I'm mighty fond of you, and I know you're pure gold at heart. When love is real, it isn't blind, you know. It sees everything, but it skids past what it doesn't want to see. You're a man's girl, Tess. There's something about you that appeals to a thrill-hunter like Brenon, as well as it appeals to me. New York would give you the glad hand, all right. But you're young and you're hungry for a good time. So I'm wondering if New York wouldn't go to your head, just as the jazz music did last night."

She wasn't angry.

"And would New York's going to my head be worse than Marysville's going to my head and killing it of dry rot?"

"For me—yes. But I'm selfish, of course."

"I didn't know you'd developed into such a philosopher, Jim," she mused, gazing out over the water and seeing much farther than even the sun-flamed windows of Marysville lighthouse. Then, suddenly coming back to him, she said with conviction, "Just the same, I'm going to try your New York, Jim. Aunt Kit's a dear and I'll hate like the dickens to leave her. But I think Broadway will agree with me as well as Marysville does, anyway. You really don't know what a scandalous creature I've de-

veloped into, Jim. Ask some of the Puritan spinsters, male and female, around here. I swim in a one-piece bathing suit, as you've seen. And though that's the only sensible thing there is to swim in, John Lockwood, head of the school board, thinks it's not at all the thing for a kindergarten-teacher. I chaperoned the high school straw-ride to Parksburg last month, and I let them get away with murder, the poor, pleasure-starved kids. And there was a fuss about that. I danced every time the band played, including encores, at the high school dance—five times with Scotty Trevor, who is our best Marysville imitation of Draper Brenon—and all the old folks had faces as long as a fiddle. And I smashed up Scotty's Hup on the way home when he grabbed me while I was driving. So I'm a real wild woman here, Jim!"

He did not like the sound of her reckless little laugh as she finished her bravado confession.

"No, you're not," he said shortly. "You're *my* girl."

Then he changed the subject, firmly but abruptly.

Yet her eyes were meditative as she kissed him good-by at the station that night. And he started his long and tedious journey back to New York in a grimy day-coach, more disturbed in mind than he cared to admit.

A week later the lank figure of John Lockwood, banker and monarch of Marysville county politics as well as schools, slouched into the kindergarten-room just after Tess had dismissed the children for the day and draped his somber, seedy frame into the extra chair by her desk. Tess had a vague idea in advance of what was coming.

"Afternoon, Miss McGuire," he said, in a voice peculiarly high and shrill, and blinked small gray eyes behind his shiny goggles. "Everything looks nice and shipshape in here. Cool too." His glasses circled the room deliberately. "Like the work, do you?"

"I'm not complaining," she answered politely and not truthfully.

He shifted in the chair. Used, in his bank, to dealing with petitioners and worried victims of mortgages, he took pleasure in making people uneasy and fancied Tess was writhing with suspense. She wasn't.

"Thought I would come around and inquire about next year," he came to the point finally. "We usually sign the contracts with our school-teachers about now. You'll be back with us, of course?"

She hesitated. Now that the issue was put squarely up to her, she was uncertain.

She was grateful that he forestalled her answer

by hitching his chair nearer, clearing his throat and saying in a more subdued tone, not unalloyed with embarrassment: "Before we talk business, Miss McGuire, I guess I ought to tell you that there was some opposition in the school board to givin' you another contract. Not that I ain't perfectly satisfied with you myself, mind you, and nobody could say that your work with the children wasn't A-number one. But some of the members brought up incidents tendin' to show that a girl who's got the responsibility of bein' an example to children ought to be more careful. Your dancin' with Harlan and his high-flyers at the carnival last Saturday night seemed to bring things to a head. There's been a lot of talk, and it was all thrashed out at the meetin' of the board this afternoon."

Tess's face, at first pink, was turning a deep red. Her chin was trembling beyond her control. She wasn't going to cry. Rather the Celtic temper of Nora McGuire was kindling a young volcano of anger in her breast. But she let him go on.

He sensed her feelings clumsily. He continued in a more conciliatory voice.

"Spite of all that," he salved her, "we're willin' to give you a contract for next year, knowin' and respectin' your aunt, Miss McNair, as we all do. And, I might add, a lot of folks have been on the



point several times of speakin' to her about you. As I say, we'll sign a new contract, which I've got in my pocket, providin' you'll agree in the future to be just a leetle more careful about how you act out of school hours. Folks talk freely in this town, you know, and we can't have a scandal in our schools, 'specially while I'm runnin' them."

The face of Tess was a deep crimson. Her violet eyes were fairly snapping, and she rose unsteadily, gripping the edge of her desk with her fingers until the knuckles reddened. Though, erect, she came hardly to Banker Lockwood's baggy chin, she loomed in front of him like a beautiful, avenging Amazon. He was frightened at the storm he had brewed in her face and body.

Yet her voice was under control, quiet and biting. There was even a note of relief in it. The time had come, she realized, for her and Marysville to part. She snapped. "I rate this talk about me at what it's worth—nothing. I didn't know there were so many stupid and malicious people in the world. I'd already decided not to come back here next year. You don't want me in your school. You don't need human flesh and blood. Offer your contract to some old maid over sixty, who has forgotten what it is to have human feelings. Then perhaps the doddering old Puritans on your board will approve."

Without another glance at him, she swept out of the room and down the corridor to the teachers' wardrobe.

On her way up Main Street, her head high in the air like a bird who has found the cage-door open and scented freedom, she made her plans.

Katherine McNair listened to her impassioned recital of the scene with calm wise eyes.

"You are right not to consider going back, Theresa," she decided in her, at fifty-five, small but clear and somewhat very comforting voice. She was practically the only person in the world who called her niece by her given name. "But have you considered what you are going to do?"

And Tess told her the plan, nurtured for over a year, and now perfected in its details during her walk home.

Miss McNair, gallant old soldier that she was, and loving this vibrant young emotion-torn girl as she did, took it without a whimper. She did not offer an opinion at once. She spent a sleepless night upon it, while her niece in the next room lay equally awake, staring half fearfully into the shaft of June moonlight slanting across her bed.

The elder lady recurred firmly and at once to the subject over the breakfast table.

"You are your mother all over again, Tess," she



*A Paramount Picture.*

"GIVE IT ALL UP AND MARRY ME," JIM URGED.

*Manhandled.*



said tenderly. "I can see her in you more every day. You are twenty now, and you have a mind of your own. I'm confident you can take care of yourself anywhere. There's nothing in the world I would regret more than to see you leave here. But I can appreciate your feelings. Nora's were the same. And trying to change them and keep you here would be as wrong as it would be useless."

Small twin tears shone in Katherine McNair's wise old eyes, and Tess thought panickly what would happen if her aunt should break suddenly into weeping, whether all her plans would not voluntarily be abandoned in the grief of her beloved benefactor. But the old lady recovered and asked almost crisply, "Have you written Jim?"

Jim's answer was characteristically to the point:

"I can see you're bound to try your luck. I'll be tickled to death to have you near me. There's a vacant room in the boarding-house where I'm stopping. Shall I engage it for you? It's no palace, but it's clean and reasonable in price. Write me what train you're arriving on, and I'll meet you at Grand Central."

## CHAPTER VII

**T**HE restless murmur of voices in the vault-like side-rom of the Grand Central Terminal was punctuated suddenly by the staccato rapping of an automatic stylograph against loose paper, and a hundred pairs of eyes were focussed eagerly upon the blackboard mounted above the high platform at one end of the room. A bored uniformed station attendant consulted the electrically produced writings and, slouching over to the blackboard, wrote, "New London Express. On Time. Track 25."

Jim Hogan, still breathless from hustling out of the Subway, but grateful that he had reached his train-level in time, took in this intelligence at a glance and hurried out to Track 25. Joining the throng that was already waiting behind the confining ropes, he removed his straw hat and mopped his over-heated brow, then, like the others, watched eagerly the iron-grilled gate guarded by its two uniformed custodians. In five minutes there was a commotion on the other side of the glass-and-metal barrier, the guards clanged the gates open, and a crowd of men, women, suit-cases, children and red-

capped porters began pouring out. Jim pressed forward, scanning with darting glances, the vari-colored surge of humanity. At last he saw Tess.

Trim as any Fifth Avenue limousined débutante, he proudly enough said to himself, at that first vision of her. A little blue cloche pressed tightly upon her dark bobbed head, the familiar violet eyes bright but confident in their setting of straight piquant nose and tanned cheeks, with the ruddy glow of outdoor health showing through, a riotously red Deauville scarf surmounting with careless grace the severely tailored blue suit that showed the slim, supple lines of her body, she caused many a head to be turned her way and to wonder who the lucky person was who was meeting her. Almost instantly she caught sight of Jim's gesticulating hand, and he stepped under the ropes to her side with a wide smile of welcome. Her ripe lips met his in full view of the swollen August Saturday afternoon Grand Central crowd, and a score of envious males sighed almost audibly.

She looked around with keen pleasure at the seething activity packing the great concrete-and-marble temple of transportation under its high blue dome and, as he took possession of her suit-case, exclaimed, "Oh, Jim, isn't it marvelous to think I'm in New York at last!"

“And with me!” added Jim—but she did not seem to hear him.

He found speech less easy as he led the way through the onrushing cohorts, past the gay concourse shop-windows, down the thickly populated marble steps, and finally through the clacking gates to the hot subterranean depths of the Lexington Avenue Subway up-town platform. Perspiring human bodies pressed tightly around them, twenty deep, as inside the iron runway they waited for the express train. To Tess, it seemed both strangely new and strangely familiar.

With a roar and a screech of iron against iron, the train lurched swiftly around the curve, a dirty greenish-black serpent in twelve segments, and slowed reluctantly to a stop in front of them. The car-doors rolled bumpily open at once. All except the one immediately before them. It lurched drunkily and stuck, half-closed. A grimy-faced guard in a streaked white uniform much too large for him, appeared from within the train, flung his pudgy form against the door's rubber-padded edge, and, with a snarl at the passengers who were trying to squeeze out past him, forced it violently open.

“Let 'em off, pleez! Watch yer step! Let 'em off, pleez! Watch yer step!” bellowed the fat gray-



clad platform men in their great brute-voices, barriers between the coming and going mobs.

The last passenger out, the giant Cerberuses stepped aside, and, as if released and propelled forward by one spring, the entering hordes flung themselves at the yawning doors as if their lives depended upon being first over the threshold. Tess's hat was knocked askew, her new suede shoes were bruised by a score of clambering heels, she was bumped and jostled till she was sure she would have been flung to the concrete floor and trampled to suffocation, had not Jim thrust his strong right arm around her waist and steered her through the rushing tide. Luckily they were on the crest of the human surf. Once inside, the wave broke, and its parts went scampering for the few available seats, like rats for their holes. Jim did not release her until he had dropped her upon a narrow but empty section of the dirty wicker, secured by the simple strategy of imposing his big body between the rest of New York and the treasured space, and daring all and sundry to knock him away.

With a mammoth jerk that sent Tess lurching against the fat shoulder of the garlic-fragrant, paint-splotched laborer beside her, the train resumed its merry way. On it rushed, clanging, screaming

and swaying through the black dungeon, studded regularly with lights that blinked red, green and yellow like mocking eyes. Swaying on his metallic strap, showing black where the white enamel was chipped off, Jim shouted down reassuring words above the pandemonium. Tess felt an ache in her throat from her efforts to reply to the small percentage of his attempted conversation that she could hear, striving courageously but with little success, between-whiles, to repair her disheveled attire.

“Whew!” she breathed as, having disembarked at Eighty-sixth Street, they emerged from the steel Avernus and regained the inhabitable level of the sidewalk. She sniffed the outside air gratefully, hot as it was.

“That was terrible,” she admitted, still bewildered and still a trifle depressed.

“Oh, that’s the first thing you’ll have to get used to,” Jim grimly remarked. “You’ll learn to battle with the rest of them, after a while. You’ve got to admit it delivers you there quick.”

“So does a smashed airplane—but how?”

“It’s no worse than the other things in this town. It’s the curse of New York that everybody always wants to do the same things at the same times. You live in a jam.”

But nothing could utterly dismay her that day.

She was in the city of promise, at last, fault-packed as it might be.

They walked a few blocks to the South, down a noisy thoroughfare littered with trolleys, dirty noisy children and little squalid shops, then east another few blocks lined with drab brownstone houses looking exactly alike and as if they had all seen much better days. The front steps, for the most part chipped and split, leading to the dark-looking vestibules, contained numerous hot and drooping specimens of humanity seeking gossip and a late afternoon breath of air with housemates and neighbors.

It looked hopelessly sordid to Tess, far different than she had imagined. But she consoled herself with the thought that a fabulous Gay White Way and a resplendent Fifth Avenue were somewhere around the next corner. Even if she had to live for a while in this mess, there would be many compensations. And perhaps Jim's boarding-house was of a better grade than these sullen-faced homes that had fallen upon evil days.

But when Jim said, "Here we are," she looked up to find that the rooming-house maintained by Mrs. Julia Binner stood quite as unalluring, to all outward appearances, as the rest of the neighborhood. The dirty brown steps had smooth hollows in their center from the tread of two generations,

and on one side the iron railing, with its self-defective ornamental notches serrating the top, was broken and twisted. Nevertheless Tess tripped blithely up the stones beside Jim and her suit-case and waited eagerly while he adjusted his key in the lock of the door with its glass panels covered with a frayed rectangle of ill-chosen and somewhat soiled lace curtain.

Inside, the gloom was partly explained by the dark red paper that covered the walls. Directly ahead of them loomed a long flight of stairs, covered with well-worn carpet that nearly matched the walls, and to the right of the narrow hall a wide brown-portière entrance led to the parlor, the community rest-room for the convenience of lodgers and their callers. The shutters in this room had been drawn against the heat of the day, but in the poor light Tess's circling eyes could glimpse the uninviting furnishings—innumerable chairs, all looking quite uncomfortable, a spindly center-table littered with frayed magazines and a fish-bowl filled with brackish green water and occasional flashes of red. A pianola leaned slightly forward under its top-heavy weight of piled-high music-rolls in their boxes, and a battered oaken victrola with its lid up and the needle digging into a half-played record looked oddly like an open mouth ready to bite at the unwary.

“Mrs. Binner! Oh, Mrs. Binner!” Jim was shouting up the steps, wondering if he shouldn’t have rung the bell before entering, since he had a stranger of the opposite sex with him.

In a few minutes the noise of a heavy and slow-moving object getting slowly under way sounded from the regions above, and soon Mrs. Binner came grunting down the stairs. Tess always hated to see big women simper, and the landlady was of ample proportions and of quite evident Germanic origin, with florid face, a small hard mouth and a dishonest smile, and she undeniably simpered when Jim introduced her to Tess.

“This is the young lady you told me about, ain’t it, Mr. Hogan?” she inquired. “Come right this way, Miss—McGuire. I got a lovely front room for you right on the floor under Mr. Hogan.” And she led the way up the long traverse of dull red steps again, Tess following and Jim and the suit-case bringing up the rear.

An hour later, when Jim stopped by for her, Tess had unpacked her bag and stowed its contents away in the child-sized closet and the plain bird’s-eye-maple bureau, had salvaged her face, hands, hair and clothes from the ravages wrought by the heat and dust, and was sitting on the hard brass bed surveying her kingdom and trying not to be discour-

aged. It was so different from her neat and roomy chintz-curtained bedroom that overlooked the sparkling waters of the sound. True, it had the advantage of being in the front of the house, though there was little of interest save light and air in the street below, and Tess knew, from the price quoted her by the landlady, that she could not keep even these unattractive quarters for long if she did not quickly land a job.

“Well, what do you think of it?” smiled Jim, leaning against her door-jamb.

“Not bad,” she smiled bravely back. “Not bad at all.” At the same instant she almost leaped from the bed in alarm as the ear-splitting clangor of a dinner-bell rang out seemingly right under her feet.

Jim laughed.

“That’s just Katie’s playful way of announcing supper,” he explained, and, motioning Tess out into the hall, instructed her to lean over the railing, where she spied a lean, slatternly creature fanning the air with a huge dinner-bell as if her life depended on getting the largest possible volume of sound out of it. It was not long before the stairs were creaking with other signs of life. Mrs. Binner’s boarders were approaching their evening meal.

Mustered at their places around the long table in the stuffy dining-room, with its absurdly colored

center chandelier casting uncertain light over feast and feasters, they were a diverse and somewhat bedraggled crew. A place had been reserved for the recent recruit, beside Jim, and he introduced her as briefly as possible to her platemates as "Miss McGuire, from my home town."

The pale watery-eyed Katie was balancing hot dishes perilously over their heads, and soon the assemblage was hard at work, with all mufflers wide open.

Tess, always a fastidious eater, was particularly fascinated by the manner in which the human engine of food-destruction on her left operated. In a few swift strokes of the knife and fork he had caused a mountain of potatoes and a fair-sized veal chop to vanish down his ample mouth, and now was looking around apparently for new dishes to conquer. His meandering eyes met Tess's. Jim had introduced him as Sam Walters, she remembered, and Walters had added for some mysterious reason, "Of Walters and Ward." He wore a very loud shirt, white, striped with broad purple, with stiff linen collar to match, and flamboyant purple cravat stabbed with a pin mounting a diamond so large that Tess knew it couldn't possibly be genuine. His sparse black hair was oiled and sleeked close to his forehead, and his smooth-shaven, middle-aged and

mottled face showed deep lines, denoting late hours and unhealthy food.

“Ever been on the stage, Miss McGuire?” he now asked her in a brisk nasal voice.

“No,” she answered. “Why do you ask?”

“Natural question to ask a pretty girl like you. Stage is my business. Walters and Ward—Komedie with a Kick. We got a great act. Ever see it? No? Played the Palace four months ago. Playing Mack time now, but expect to get back on the Orpheum Circuit in the fall. Logical place for a big-time act like—What’s your line?”

“Why, I haven’t any line just at present. I *have* thought of going on the stage.”

“Tough times in the profession right now. When an act like ours is doing split-time at a dump like the Galaxy, you can bet it’s hard pickin’s for everybody. And there’s lots of good acts layin’ off altogether. Got any prospects?”

“No,” she admitted.

“Well, say, me and you ought to get together. Maybe I can put you wise to somethin’. Meantime I got to beat it up to the theater. Goin’ to spring a new song number on ’em to-night and have to rehearse it with the orchestra leader.” He turned his head swiftly around and bawled, “Katie, rassel that pie up here quick like a good kid, will you, I got to



beat it." And defying acute indigestion, he bolted his pie, flung down his napkin and with a breezy "See you later," to Tess, made for his hat and the outer door.

"Isn't he funny?" she commented to Jim.

"Not for a vaudeville actor," he answered, and then colored a little, remembering Tess's father. And he frowned a little, remembering a thought that was troubling him.

When they were sitting side by side on the lumpy divan in the parlor, he asked, "You aren't really serious about going on the stage, are you, Tess?"

"I've got to do something, Jim," she said, surprised at his rather deprecating tone. "And I'm not ashamed of being able to act, if I had the chance. I guess it's in my blood. I want to try to do something with my art work, too. Maybe Mr. Walters really could help me."

"Oh, he's just a bunch of noise. Nobody here pays any attention to him."

"But I must get something as a starter. Couldn't he at least give me the names of some of the managers?" She saw the cloud on Jim's wide face, and forced a laugh. "But don't let's talk about *me* any more. Talk about *you*. Tell me about your job. And that terribly complicated carburetor or something like that you were working on."

Slowly the cloud disappeared.

“Well, this is the first chance I’ve had to spill the beans. I take a new job Monday. That’s why I came to get off this afternoon to meet you. I begin as foreman of the machine-shop at the Polar Star Garage, down on Fifty-seventh Street. I’m to get more money and it’s a much larger shop than the one I was in. And the boss promised me the use of the machines and tools in my off-time, to work on my carburetor. He doesn’t believe in it—but he’s humoring me. You may think I’m nutty, too, Tess, but I really believe I’ve got something big in this carburetor. If it does what I think it’ll do, I can cut down the gasoline consumption on a standard car about twenty-five per cent. Any of the big accessories companies would grab a thing like that in a minute and pay real money for it. I’ve already written out to the Detroit Accessories people, the largest in the business, describing what I’ve got. They wrote back the other day asking for more details and suggesting I install the carburetor in my own machine, make a road-test, and get a report out to them.”

“Oh, Jim!” said the girl at his side, not sharing in his smile.

“‘My own machine’ is good,” continued Jim. “What I’ve got to do now is get permission to stick

my carburetor into somebody else's car and see what she'll do. I've been working day and night on this darned thing. You ought to see my room. It looks like a machine-shop. Mrs. Binner has a fit about it regularly once a week."

"Jim, will you be rich if this carburetor actually is any good?" she solemnly asked him, thrilled a little that her own quiet, hard-working Jim should have stumbled on any such promise of wealth.

"You can bet I'll get all it's worth," averred the young inventor. "We'll get married the day after I sign the contracts." And he added softly, "Won't we?"

She nodded only half-affirmatively. She wasn't so sure. She was in New York to make good for herself also, and she couldn't help secretly hoping that Jim's carburetor-dream wouldn't come true until hers had had a chance.

"How about celebrating my new job by going to the movies?" he invited.

So they arrived at the Eighty-sixth Street Theater in time for the second show and brazenly held hands in the dark of the packed theater, like grammar-school children.

Somebody was laboriously picking a one-fingered tune out on the parlor-piano at Mrs. Binner's when they returned. The little, semi-bald man hunched

over the tuneless keys swung around squeakily on the stool as he heard intruders. It was Sam Walters.

“Say,” he accosted them in his usual brisk nasal tones about three times louder than necessary, “I been thinking about you, Miss McGuire. Any particular line of stage work you were thinking of breaking into?”

“I’d prefer straight drama,” was the slightly retarded but unmistakably solemn reply.

“Legit, hey. Well then, Hertz is the man for you to see—Lou Hertz, Longacre Building, Broadway and Forty-second. Happen to know he’s casting a show right now, one of them foreign spectacular things he bought in Europe this spring. There ought to be a lot o’ ‘dumb parts’ in it—you know—just say a line or two and otherwise stand around and look interested. Don’t take experience to do that. He’ll probably fall for your looks and take a chance on you’re getting away with it. Like to go see him?”

“I’m awfully anxious to get started,” hesitatingly conceded the solemn-eyed girl.

“O. K. Here’s my card.” He drew forth an over-sized oblong of paste-board from his waistcoat pocket and presented it to her with a flourish. “Worked in a musical show for Hertz once. He

thought my work was great, but the show was a flop. Only lasted three weeks on Broadway to rotten business. Ruined a whole three months' solid bookings for me and my partner too. 'Nix,' says I after that, 'no more production work for me. I'll stick to the old two-a-day, where you know where you're at and where real talent is appreciated.' Say, what do you folks think of this little number?"

He swung around to face the keyboard and put his finger to work thumping out his ditty, accompanying the thin music with an equally thin tenor voice. Before he had finished and they had assuaged him with their preoccupied approval, Tess, tired out by the most strenuous day in her life, was nearly asleep on Jim's shoulder.

## CHAPTER VIII

“**M**R. Hertz ain’t in yet. Expected any minute,” recited the callow office boy, who was yet to have his first shave. He turned away from the luminous violet eyes and resumed his throne back of the railing that separated the waiting wistful from the sacred domain of three leaded glass-doors, bearing, from left to right, the legends: Louis A. Hertz, Jr., Louis A. Hertz, and A. L. Hermann.

“May I wait?” asked Tess, fresh from her first single-handed bout with the Grand Central-Times Square Shuttle, and rather welcoming a chance to sit down.

“Sure, help yourself.” The young custodian of the portals waved a dirty hand insolently toward the chairs outside the railing.

It was as she turned that Tess discovered the other two girls. The dark, willowy, over-rouged one in the corner looked so cold and unfriendly that Tess instinctively drifted over to the chair near the warmer marceled blonde. The latter’s plump, good-natured face, contorted a little by the gum she was so industriously chewing, relaxed into a smile of welcome as Tess sat down.

“Hot, ain’t it, dearie?” she opened in a metallic voice. Then she continued, “Huntin’ a job?”

Tess admitted it.

“Well, there ain’t much chance here, I guess. Hertz is all filled up, I hear.” She sighed a deep sigh that seemed to ripple all down her plump frame, its contours generously displayed in the flimsy, summery dress she was wearing. “This is about my last stop too. The show business is sure rotten this summer. Would you believe it, I been huntin’ for three weeks now, and not a nibble? I had a chance last week to play in stock in Harrisburg, but you know, dearie, there ain’t nothin’ in that. You had any luck?”

Tess thought she might as well admit her shocking newness.

“This is the first place I’ve tried,” she sparred.

The blonde woman shot her an appraising, not unsympathetic glance. “You ain’t never been on the stage, have you, dearie?”

Tess admitted it.

“From the sticks?”

Tess guessed she meant the country and admitted that too.

“D’ you have to work for a living, or have you got jack o’ your own?” When she observed Tess raising her eyebrows as if to question the propriety

of that over-personal remark, the blonde promptly explained, "What I mean is, d'you really need a job? Because I've got a hunch we ain't neither of us goin' to get one here." She shifted her chair nearer to Tess and, with a quick glance at the plastic brunette beauty in the corner, continued, "I like your looks, dearie, and I'll tip you off to somethin'. Holton and Clark, down at Fifth and Twenty-fourth, are takin' on clothes-models. The work ain't very hard, and the pay is good. I tried there yesterday myself, but they turned me down. Said I was too plump, the dirty bums. But I'm pretty sure they'd take a nifty looker like you, and Gawd knows, you ain't overweight."

Tess thanked her and sat upright, at attention, as did the other two job-seekers, when the door swung briskly open and a little dark dapper man of about thirty-five, with gray spats and black malacca cane, twinkled across the miniature reception-room, through the gate in the railing and through the door room captioned Louis A. Hertz, Jr.

A few minutes later a buzzer snarled, and the office-boy announced to the tall brunette in a surprisingly civil voice, "Mr. Hertz will see you now."

"What I was goin' to say," resumed Tess's friend, with an amused look at their rival as she swept haughtily past them, "what I was goin' to



say, dearie, is if you need work right away, why not try Holton and Clark? Personally I ain't worryin'. I got a friend in Thorndyke's, the swell Fifth Avenue department store, who can always land me there if I need to. It's only waitin' on the counter, you know, but it's better than nothin'. If I get stuck, me for Thorndyke's. You might remember that, too. Ask for Mr. Moysey, head of basement, and say Pinkie Doran sent you. That's me—Pinkie Doran. What's your name, dearie?"

Tess told her.

"Irish like me, hey. Well, I can see, dearie, that you and me are goin' to be cell-mates some day!"

A cool drawl sounded just above their heads. The stately brunette had reappeared from the promised land and was announcing languidly, "You girls might as well beat it. Nothing doin', Hertz says." And she swept majestically out of the door, as if utterly bored with the whole wretched business.

It was Pinkie Doran's turn next, and she came out in three minutes with the same verdict.

"Turned me down flat as a pancake in Child's. You goin' to wait, Tess?"

"I might as well, I suppose." She was determined to keep her courage up. Mr. Hertz must see that she was different from those other girls,

though she already had a tepid spot in her heart for Pinkie Doran.

“Suit yourself. But don’t you forget Holton and Clark’s, and Thorndyke. Moysey is the name. Well, so long. I got a hunch I’ll see you again some time.”

When, a moment later, Tess was sitting beside the glass-topped desk of the little fashion-plate Hertz, she was sure he was repeating the identical words to her that he had to the others.

“Sorry, Miss—er—McGuire,” while his beady black eyes searched her body as a bookmaker sizes up a blooded stallion, “but there’s really nothing we can offer you here—not a thing.” The freshly manicured finger-tips of his left hand touched those of his right lightly over his slightly adipose but sleekly tailored stomach. He glanced down at Sam Walters’ card desecrating the nudity of his glass-topped desk.

Hertz grinned and asked, in his clipped polite tone, “Who in the hell is Sam Walters?” Without pausing for her answer, he went on, still appraising her fresh young beauty, “But you look like you might get along, kid. If we were doing any musical stuff, I’d stick you in the chorus in a minute. How about the movies? Ever try them? No? They’re about the only thing keeping the actors from starving to

death *this* summer. Suppose I give you a letter to Lou Gude, over at the Filmart Studio, in Astoria? He's the casting director, and a very good boy. What d' you say?"

She wondered if it were just an accident that resulted in his hand dropping over hers gently, where it rested on the edge of his desk. Certainly he hadn't been looking at her hand. Well, what was the harm? He was in a position to do her a favor perhaps. She allowed her hand to rest under his a moment, then, with a little innocent-wise flash of her violet eyes toward him, gently withdrew it.

"It would be very nice of you to give me a letter," she said demurely. He pushed one of the row of buttons on his desk, and a stenographer bustled in. When the latter had inscribed her hen's tracks in her book, and left, Hertz did not ask Tess to wait outside for her letter. He gave her his time, and space in his private office, in order to drink in her unspoiled loveliness, and manuever for the sensation of again pressing that elusive and very smooth little hand, all under the pretext of offering her fatherly advice about breaking into motion pictures.

"Don't forget to call me up and tell me how you make out," he admonished, when he had signed and delivered the letter to her. "We can talk it over at lunch at the Knickerbocker Grill." He had

long ago made it a rule never to trifle with the girls who came to him for jobs. It put him under obligations. It was bad business. But here was a brand-new type. Not the usual bold and blatant Broadway show-girl, ready to snatch the gold out of your teeth if you gave her as much as a smile. She was—

But by that time she had said, "I'll let you know if I land," smiled, and was gone.

But when, after a half-hour ride into the unknown wastes across the East River, she came to Filmart's low, rambling concrete cross between a temple and a factory of the silent drama and had at last been ushered into the presence of Mr. Louis Gude, that hot and harassed young man told her shortly and succinctly that they were shutting up shop "lock, stock and barrel" on Saturday for two months and that the Prince of Wales himself could not get an "extra's" rôle in a picture even if he were to guarantee to appear for nothing.

After a week of disappointment, concealed valiantly from Jim by a careful mask, Tess arrived via five other theatrical offices, two other movie studios and three "Help Wanted" ads in the *Times*, which she answered but never heard from, at the employment office of Holton and Clark, Ladies' and Misses' Gowns. There, to her utter amazement and

delight, she was hired in three minutes as a model by a sharp-faced, red-haired coatless man, who wore purple sleeve-garters and juggled half of a cold, half-consumed cigar in his mouth as he talked.

She told Jim triumphantly about it that night and he said rather doubtfully, "Do you think you'll like that kind of work?"

"I don't know enough about it to say. I won't stick at it permanently, of course. But it's as good as anything temporarily. I'll be wearing lovely clothes, even though they're not mine, and perhaps I'll be able to get some pretty things at a discount."

"I've heard some queer things about this cloak-model game. However—" He shrugged his shoulders. What was the use of discouraging her with obstacles that were perhaps chimeras?

Tess's first week at Holton and Clark's passed without incident. The work was tiring, and the exhilaration of wearing Parisian creations for a living wore off quickly under the ordeal of being forced to stand interminably in them while loud-voiced buyers haggled over price, style and fabric with equally loud-voiced sellers. Nor did she enjoy the manhandling which the bolder of the would-be purchasers subjected her to, under the pretext of a closer inspection of the attire she was parading.

On Tuesday of the second week, a fat little Mr.

Roth of Duluth attempted to follow her into the dressing-room and emitted a sharp squeal of pain as she slammed the door smartly in his face. She was not frightened, just decently angry in a calm way.

The following day, another customer invited her to lunch, and she refused. In the afternoon he invited her to dinner and a show, and she refused rather more emphatically. The next day, Arnold Holton himself called her into his private office and said, "I've rather a serious report on you, Miss McGuire. I'm told you insulted one of our best customers, Emil Grossman, of Grossman and Katz."

She stared at him. "Insulted him?" she asked blankly.

"Well, you read him the riot act when he invited you out to lunch and almost blew his head off when he mentioned dinner, didn't you?"

"I refused his invitations, if that's what you mean. I'm not accustomed to lunching with men I don't know, and who do not appeal to me."

Tess's Irish was slowly rising.

Holton, a natural-born brow-beater, regarded her with a bullying eye.

"Miss McGuire, it's the custom here for models to accommodate the wishes of our customers, if it's consistent with propriety. That's only reason and

good business. And it strikes me it was quite consistent in this case."

A vision of the leering, thick-necked Grossman flashed into Tess's brain. She flushed angrily.

"Very well," she snapped, "if that's your policy, it isn't mine, and I resign and eat where I want to!"

## CHAPTER IX

**T**HE girl stopped at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street. She stopped short, with a look of wonder in her stippled violet eyes as she stared up the long slope of Murray Hill.

She saw an asphalted valley as clean as a gnawed bone, a valley threaded by twin lines of motor-cars that flashed in the morning sun, a valley treed with fragile bronze towers that winked with mysteriously tinted lights. Then she became conscious, for the first time, of the cliff-dweller windows along the walls of that valley, the banks and banks of windows that turned a stone-gray canyon into a competitive riot of color, that gave it depth and meaning and left it as expositional as a bazaar under glass. Those windows, from the challenging gold letterings about them and above them to the assertive gay wall-signs and roof-signs beyond them, even on to the occasional proclaiming pennon above the serrated line of the shop-tops, in some way suggested combat to her. It was a cry for attention, a tendering of service, a solemn battle to survive out of the crush and welter of city life.

And it seemed fitting enough, as she lifted her



gaze still higher, that she should catch sight of the drifting gray script of a sky-writer as his wheeling plane left its smoke-trail across the appropriated blue arch of the heavens. For this, she remembered, was the core of New York. And New York, she had been told from her childhood, was the center of the world, the Mecca unto which youth fared to try its fortune, to hate its tumult as one failed in that test, and to love it as one succeeded.

It both thrilled her and frightened her a little. She liked the color and glamour and movement of that great estuary of trade at the same time that the immensity of the vista between the towering gray façades left her vaguely conscious of her own littleness. She felt poignantly alone in that city which had taken no thought of her existence, which had so indifferently turned away from her approach. But she had no intention of giving up. She still intended to fight for her place in the sun. And she had one chance left, she remembered as she consulted the slip on which the address of the Thorn-dyke store was written.

She stepped out from the curb, with that impulse toward action still warm in her young body. She disregarded, in her hurry, the first line of cars that shuffled past her. Then she stopped, in a momen-

tary panic, before the second line bearing down on her. And as she hesitated, she caught sight of the huge traffic-officer at the street-center.

She was not conscious of calling out to him. But he must have either heard or seen her, for with an imperious lift of his white-gloved hand he brought the charging avalanche to a halt.

She had not intended to fling herself into his arms, but safety, she knew, lay in the shadow of that sheltering blue figure. And the officer smiled down at her, approvingly, as he drew her into neutral territory and motioned for the arrested tide to take up its way.

"Yuh got 'o step careful, in a town like this," he admonished as they waited for the flurry of wheeled things to sweep past.

"I know," she admitted as she crowded close to him. "But I took a chance."

"Don't take 'em, girlie, don't take 'em," was his friendly advice, as he piloted her across the polished black pavement to the curb, where she was conscious of his handclasp on her arm as he added: "Let 'em kill the homely ones!"

She rewarded him with a smile of silent gratitude that sent him humming back to his mid-road duties. And as she glanced about at him, for a

moment, she was tempted to accept him as a sign and an augury. There was always someone, if you were honest and open, who would come to your help. 'And there was something about men, even city men, that made them considerate with you if you were considerate with them.

Her heart lightened, as though that blue-clad arm were still sustaining her, as she turned into the side-street and made her way toward the Thorn-dyke store. But her spirits sank again as she invaded the intimidating emporium of trade. It made a difference, she remembered as she repeated her politely-worded inquiries as to where she could find the Employment Manager, for she thought it politic to ask for him first instead of for Pinkie Doran's Mr. Moysey, whether you had something to buy or something to sell. Yet she was relieved, after being ushered into the gray-toned office on the fifth floor, to find no bearded lion in its den, but a sad-eyed and slightly obese man of middle-age with a gardenia in his button-hole and very little hair on his head. He sat checking a column of figures at a mahogany desk flanked by a mahogany railing. He even betrayed neither surprise nor hostility when she hesitatingly explained that she had been sent there to apply for work. He merely motioned her

into a chair and reached to a pigeon-hole filled with blue-tinted papers. One of these he handed to her before returning to his figures.

It was her little gasp of despair that made him look up from his column.

"I don't quite know how to do this," she complained as she met his abstractedly inquiring eye. Yet that eye softened a trifle, she noticed, at the appeal in her glance.

"Then supposing I do it for you," he suggested as he reached out for the blue-tinted form.

"Would you?" she breathed in tremulous gratitude.

He did not answer her. And he did not look up at her again. But his gold-banded fountain-pen moved methodically across the application-blank as he wrote certain cryptic figures along its top.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Theresa McGuire," answered the girl with the thick-lashed violet eyes that studied the shining pink skull between his temple-fringes.

"Age?" he next perfunctorily inquired.

"Twenty," was the soft-noted reply.

"References?"

"I've this one from our minister at Marysville and this from the principal of the school where I taught kindergarten for a year."



*A Paramount Picture.*

TESS LISTENED TO THE ARTIST, BUT COULD GLEAN LITTLE.

*Manhandled.*



Her color deepened as his cursory eye inspected the slightly dog-eared documents.

"What city experience have you had?" was his next preoccupied question.

"I was a dress-model for two weeks at Holton & Clark's."

"Why did you leave that firm?"

"Because my work there meant entertaining out-of-town buyers. And that wasn't the sort of thing I came to the city for."

"Of course," was the other's still impersonal reply. But the note of fierceness in her husky young voice brought his abstracted eyes up to her face. The man at the desk, for the first time, seemed to behold her as a living and breathing human being. He saw a slender-bodied girl whose limpid eyes, at the moment, were slightly luminous with excitement. The smooth texture of her healthy skin, just over the cheek-bones, was splashed with the same betraying sign of excitement. There was delicacy in the line of the straight short nose, just as there was a touch of ardent and untarnished youth in the poise of the back-thrust shoulders that would have appeared combative, but for the neutralizing soft curve of the red under-lip with the faintest trace of audacity about its corners.

"What *did* you come to New York for?" the man

at the desk inquired, obviously more interested, at the end of that assessing stare. What he liked most about her was the look of gravity which the hooded eyes gave to a face not grave in itself, the suggestion of will in the courageous small chin.

"I've a gift for acting and drawing," she explained, "and I wanted to do some kind of stage or art work."

"But Thorndyke's is merely a department-store." She saw his smile, remote as heat-lightning. It puzzled but it did not deter her.

"I was hoping there'd be something in your art-department here."

"You must mean our advertising department," he corrected. "We use artists there, of course, but they're all trained men."

"Then you've nothing for me, after all?"

He met her note of forlornness with a prolonging quiet smile that established an undefined something between them. She could not have explained why, but she knew that he was definitely on her side, that he was ready to help her. Men were more generous than women, in that respect, if one only met them half-way.

"Oh, yes, I have," he said with a paternal hand on her arm. "I can give you a very good position at one of our basement counters."



Basement? That was where Pinkie's Mr. Moysey held forth.

"What would I have to do there?" she asked after he had spoken briefly over a phone and restored the receiver to its hook.

"To begin with, you'd sell marked-down goods. That's in our bargain-counter department. You'll have to act as stock-girl, at first, and have instruction in the class-room, three mornings a week, on selling and making out sales-slips and that sort of thing."

"Would I have to stay long with—with the marked-down goods?" she asked, a quaver of disappointment in her voice. If she leaned closer to him, she seemed unconscious of the movement. She had learned something about New York men in that fortnight at Holton and Clark's.

"I don't think you're the kind of girl who'd have to," he said as his assessing eye once more swept her slender body. Then he added as he saw the slow flush that stained her face: "You're the type of girl that wants to get on. I can see that. And a girl advances, my dear, precisely as she's willing to please people."

If there was any deeper meaning to that speech, she preferred to ignore it.

"I want to get on," she murmured as she let her

thoughtful violet eyes meet his. She hated sordidness, and she intended to fight her way out of it, out of the sordidness of side-street rooming-houses and dairy lunches and bargain-counters for marked-down goods. She did not wince, this time, at the weight of his hand on her arm. "It's good of you to help me," she merely said in her husky and intimate murmur. He had, in some way, become faintly repugnant to her. But she was less afraid of him than before.

"It's nice to know I can continue to help you," he observed in a solemnized tone of gallantry, lavishing her with an emphasizing small smile that did not add to her happiness.

She sat with downcast eyes, conscious of his discomforting close scrutiny. She was averse to appearing bold, but, on the other hand, she was even more averse to antagonizing him. The eyes that rested on the white hollow of her throat, however, grew suddenly impersonal at the approach of a bespectacled official carrying a sheaf of papers.

"Well, if you're to be one of us," announced the employment manager, all business again as he rang a bell, "you may as well meet your aisle-manager. He'll give you your number and place and explain things in general. Then he'll pass you on to the timekeeper at the door and to the doctor for a

physical examination. Miss Stiner, take this young lady down to Mr. Moysey."

Miss Stiner maintained a dignified silence until the cage-door of the elevator swung shut behind them.

"You've made a hit with the main top, Birdie, for he's shooting you straight to counter-work," she explained to the newcomer, who smiled with the fortifying thought that she had a friend at court. And the new employee at Thorndyke's was relieved to find Mr. Moysey a much younger man than she had expected. He enclosed her within an aura of toilet-water that emanated from his slender-waisted body, led her with a pantherlike stride about the aisles of his subterranean world, and explained in a slightly mincing but unmistakably comprehensive manner just what was expected of her.

They had turned a corner in this glorified rummage salesroom when there came to Tess's ears the sound of a tangy voice which she thought she recognized. She wheeled in its direction, and there, sure enough, ensconced behind a four-sided center lingerie counter in all her plump blonde fluffiness was Pinkie Doran herself. A long pencil protruded from her permanent wave, and her sales talk seemed somewhat impeded by gum as she assured the hatchet-faced woman who was fingering a pair of unmen-

tionables, "Yes, ma'am, guaranteed Porto Rico lace."

Then she caught sight of Tess and made a surprised gesture with hand and mouth, plainly indicating, "My Gawd." The customer, looking up quickly, frowned and bristled as if she thought Pinkie intended disparagement of her. At any rate she stalked off without buying, and Miss Doran was free to give her attention to the neophyte, who came over to her, Mr. Moysey continuing wonderingly in her wake.

"What are you doin' here, dearie?" asked Pinkie. "Lookin' for a job?"

"I've already got the job," smiled Tess. "I'm to work down here." And then with a calculated smile at her guide, she added, "For Mr. Moysey."

He warmed up closer.

"Are you and Miss Doran acquainted?" he asked her.

"Sure, Gerald," Pinkie cut in, "we're old pals. Fact is, I foolishly tipped her off to this place. And any friend of mine better treat her pretty nice too."

"Naturally," he glowed, "naturally."

If Pinkie saw in Tess a rival for the regard of the basement manager, it evidently didn't annoy her.

When he had led her farther afield in his kingdom and had announced that she might report for

duty the next morning, she thanked him in a voice still tremulous with gratitude. An indeterminate small glow of triumph eddied through her body as Mr. Moysey, in the shadow of the stairway, shook her hand with quite unnecessary warmth and expressed the hope that they would always be the best of friends.

Some remnant of that small glow still burned within her as she stepped into the street and headed for a corner drug-store, where she shut herself in a telephone-booth redolent of cigar-smoke and announced her victory to Jim Hogan, who betrayed no undue joy over the news she was imparting to him. Jim, she knew, had altogether different plans for her. But she proposed to be something more than a tail to the kite of Jim's problematic success. It was comfortable to know, of course, that Jim was willing to marry her. But he seemed without glamour in some way. And her ardent young heart still ached for its ever-receding dower of magnificence.

Yet she had made her first step toward that end, she told herself as she emerged into the dust-moated sunlight of the street. She was to be a part, an active and actual part, of this tremendous machinery that roared and seethed about her. She was no longer an outsider. And so immured was she in her

own thoughts that she stood scarcely conscious of the fact that she had once more reached Fifth Avenue. She discovered this only when she found herself confronted by the friendlier tides of traffic that flowed up and down that undulating canyon of commotion overhung with its aureole of misty gold. She stood beside the curb, blinking out at the caravan of cars that slithered companionably past her.

There are all kinds and colors of cars in that regal procession, landaulets and limousines, sedans and broughams and cabriolets, of bottle green and Brewster green and willow green, of purple and maroon, of dove-gray and blue and brown and basket-weave canary, cars varnished and polished, nickeled and silvered, glass-prismed and glittering, flowing past her widened eyes in a blending and intermingling double-stream of light and color. They moved and paused and slumbered on their talced rubber heels and moved on again with a rhythm not unlike the rhythm of music, pulsing in unison, an orchestra of wheeled movement solemnly conducted by a solemn blue figure with a whistle in his hand, an orchestra sonorous with its cadences of power. And the girl with the stippled violet eyes, watching them, felt a small tingle of emotion touched with hunger creep up and down her spine.

"It's a big city, isn't it?" coolly observed a lank

and tired-looking stranger close to her elbow. And he laughed a little, even as she swept him with her icy stare of aversion.

"I really couldn't help it," he explained, still unruffled. "You made me think of a fresh-hatched robin taking its first look over the nest-rim at a brand-new world!"

"You're not making it any more attractive to me," she said with all the scorn at her command.

"But you have for me," he observed as he turned and sauntered on beside her. That, she remembered Jim saying, was the trouble with New York. Men pursued women, in such places, as farm-dogs pursued rabbits. Yet her annoyer, she noticed, had at least the earmarks of a gentleman.

"Who the devil are you, anyway?" he brusquely demanded. It was only the kindness of his faded eye that kept the inquiry from being unalloyed impertinence.

"I'm a shop-girl at Thorndyke's," she flung back at him.

"Are you now?" he soliloquized aloud. "I'd never have thought it. And I'm Carl Garretson. Ah, I see that name means nothing to you. But if you happen across an especially bad novel on the newsstands it's very likely to be mine."

"If it's as bad as your manners, I don't think

I'd be interested," was her spirited retort. And he laughed again, still unruffled.

"I like that," he proclaimed. "I really do. And I like you. You'll probably doubt it, but I don't do this sort of thing as a rule. To tell the truth, you knocked my instincts galley-west, back there, by that crusader look I caught in your eyes. It only comes, you know, once or twice in a lifetime."

"While one can be insulted quite frequently," she amended.

He stopped short at that, his ruminative face touched with trouble.

"My dear girl, I wouldn't do that for the world. You'll understand that when you know me better. I may be a bit eccentric, but I'm not a bounder. And the next time we meet I hope—well, I hope it will be under less clouded circumstances."

"I hope it will never occur," she averred, almost against her will, for she found it hard to hate him, as she ought.

"I intend to make it," he announced, with his wearily unconcerned smile as he lifted his hat and turned away.



## CHAPTER X

**T**ESS McGUIRE'S first week in Thorndyke's was a series of impressions that seemed to obliterate one another like wave-marks on shore-sand. She vaguely resented being submerged to a mere number and being known as "Miss Fifty-Seven," just as she more actively resented being associated with the sale of marked-down merchandise. She nursed a distaste for rearranging soiled silk lingerie tossed about by pushing and impatient women-shoppers.

For Mr. Moysey, confronted with the problem of just where to place this attractive newcomer, had been browbeaten by Pinkie Doran against his better judgment into making her the vivid blonde's counter-mate in the underwear section of the basement. This arrangement, Mr. Moysey was secretly quite sure, seemed very unwise. For he really flattered himself that he had made an impression on Tess, as she had on him, and he would have liked to seclude her in some section of his domain, say among the garden tools, far away from the sharp-tongued Pinkie so as to be able to pursue this newer affair in comfort. Mr. Moysey was slightly ennuied at

the manner in which the ladies fell before his charm. It would be a jolly shame if a row should arise over having two of his feminine admirers overly close to each other.

“Stick her back here, Jerry, or you and me are through,” was Pinkie’s ultimatum; and he had yielded.

Tess at first entertained a mixture of amusement and distaste for her pert-faced fellow-saleslady, who impressed her as both too unshakably sure of herself and too slangily garrulous. She disliked the obliterating dark store-uniform of black luster, and the noisy talk in the cafeteria where she could get a sustaining enough lunch for twenty cents, and the over-monitorial eye of the motherly old “hostess” in the Forward Club, who studied the girl with the gardenia-white throat and proceeded to warn her against the predatory modern male. A young lady, nowadays, was taken at her own rating. She must be a serious worker in a world of workers. And no self-respecting girl, she was reminded, accepted favors from men, without danger of finding a string attached to them.

But Tess had done a little thinking of her own, in this matter of men. And even in their workaday world, she had found, a girl was still a girl. Men were the rulers of that world as Jim had said, but

they had moods and moments when they were not imperial. The busiest of them liked beauty and freshness in their lives, just as they liked a flower on their office desk. It was almost one's duty to be appealing, since it was through this appeal that one progressed. And girls had learned a lot, since the world of business had been thrown open to them. They had been given a new freedom, and that had equipped them with new defenses. They carried their own latch-keys and their own ideas of right and wrong. And if men liked you, there was no law against letting them show it. There was a limit, of course. But the modern girl knew when that limit was being approached and had a workable enough sense of humor to laugh the old-fashioned perils away.

So Tess made it a point not to ignore Mr. Moysey. She took a quiet joy in witnessing her aisle-manager's emergence from his shell of self-absorption to show her how to make out her sales-slips and pass a purchase on to the wrappers and reassemble rumpled silk night-dresses so they would look their best. If he leaned a little closer than was necessary, as he tutored the rapt-eyed newcomer in the secret of "dressing" her counter, that newcomer betrayed no outward sign of annoyance at his panther-like approach or his aromatic proxim-

ity. For, as the worldly-wise Pinkie had informed her: "Stand in with that Moysey mutt and the rest'll come easy!" So Tess was able to smile up at him, confidingly, as he fraternally picked a thread from her shoulder. And she condoned his playful tap of disapproval when she made a mistake in her sales-slip. Just as she endured his casual hand-clasp about her arm as he directed her gaze to the shelf-supply from which she was to replenish her stock.

"Yuh got it, kid!" proclaimed Pinkie after disposing of a slightly shop-worn rose-silk brassiere to a stout lady who wheezed.

"I've got what?" asked Tess, pressing an uncomfortably cold hand against her uncomfortably hot cheek-bones.

"What the frail-chasers fall for, kid," was Pinkie's sagacious retort. "The call o' the clingin' vine to the he-oak! The come-hither look in the off lamp!"

Tess was both annoyed and elated by that pronouncement. She was younger, younger in face and spirit, than the other girls about her. And if there was something about her that appealed to men, that marked her out from her meeker-spirited sisters, she was not to be blamed for what she could not help. She had no intention, at any rate, of

cheapening herself. She had her own way to make, and she intended to make it honestly. She could afford to be lenient with Mr. Moysey. But there were limits beyond which the controller of her subterranean destinies would not be permitted to venture. She had been a good girl, all her life. And she intended to remain one.

When he asked her, during one of the midday lulls, if she ever went to the movies, she said, with lowered eyes, and a silent prayer for Jim's forgiveness, that she had always been afraid to go about alone in a strange city. When Mr. Moysey inquired if she would care to see the new picture at the Cameo some evening she thanked him tremulously and expressed the hope it would not make trouble among the other girls. And Mr. Moysey, growing bolder, assured her that the others no longer stood within the range of his consideration.

But a little later in the week she forgot Mr. Moysey just as she forgot the strange new weariness that made her temples throb, when she found herself under prolonged inspection from a less dapper and a more discreetly remote figure. She realized that she was being studied by a brown-faced young man in tweeds, a somewhat shy-mannered man with genially studious eyes which looked impersonally out through thick-lensed glasses on that passing pan-

orama known as life. Tess, who was not without a quick instinct for social values, knew at once that he was the socially right sort. There was distinction in his very carelessness, in the careless forward thrust of his shoulders, in the careless swing of his cane and the unkemptness of the worn dog-skin gloves that dangled from a bulging side-pocket.

Her pulse quickened perceptibly as he advanced somewhat diffidently toward her counter. Yet she preferred to ignore his presence as he came to a stop before her array of shop-soiled finery. When she looked up, she met his gaze with a cool eye which obviously added to his trepidation.

"I should like this one, please," he proclaimed, denoting with the ferruled end of his cane a nearby garment of salmon-pink. His color, for some reason, had deepened a little.

"Four ninety-eight," announced Miss Fifty-Seven as she reached for the designated garment of frilled silk. Yet the eyes of the man with the cane and the sales-girl with the soiled silk in her hands, for some equally mysterious reason, clung together.

"Four ninety-eight," she automatically repeated, with a tint of rose spreading over the gardenia-white and tan. She watched him as he reached abstractedly into his breast-pocket for a bill-fold. But

instead of opening that oblong of morocco he continued to study the flushed face with the slightly luminous eyes.

"You're wonderful!" he startled Miss Fifty-Seven by slowly and impersonally intoning.

"I beg your pardon," she retorted. And there was a sharpness in her words which did not add to his peace of mind.

"I don't do this sort of thing, you know," he said in a panic which she recognized as being genuine. "I really don't. But I'm an artist, you see. I've a—a weakness for form and color. And when I see a face like yours I—well, I'm afraid I rather forget myself."

"What's wrong with it?" demanded the violet-eyed girl, steeled into indignation by Pinkie's derisive titter beyond the counter-end. Authors and artists, apparently, were privileged persons in this new world of hers.

"Good heavens, there's nothing wrong with it," proclaimed the solemn-eyed man. "The only thing is that it seems to be in the wrong place."

"Where would you prefer to see it?" was Tess's none too conciliatory inquiry.

"On canvas, of course," was the other's prompt and impersonal retort. "Pardon my asking, but have you ever posed?"

The slumberous violet eyes of Miss Fifty-Seven flashed with sudden fire. There was a limit, of course; and he was going beyond it.

“How dare you ask me a thing like that?” she huskily demanded. “I’m a respectable girl and I’ve—”

“Of course you are,” cut in the startled artist. “I could see that at a glance. That’s your charm. But you don’t understand. I don’t mean nudes—costume stuff. I’m doing mural panels for the new Art Theater and you looked so fresh and wonderful above that bank of soiled finery—”

“Old stuff!” audibly interrupted Pinkie Doran from the counter-end.

“You looked so vivid and vital,” pursued the man in tweeds, “that I’m afraid I rather forgot myself. Artists do that now and then.”

Tess’s face softened again. And her eyes became more ruminative.

“I’m an artist myself,” she quietly admitted. “At least, I’ve tried to be one.”

“What do you work in?” he asked, perceptibly interested.

She did not answer him. Instead, she took up her pencil and sales-book and on a blank-page blocked out with a few quick strokes an exaggerated but unmistakable portrait of Mr. Moysey.



"That's clever," admitted the artist as she passed the sheet over to him. "Quite clever!" But his enthusiasm, Tess was quick to see, was not without its qualifications. "I wish I could show you something of mine. But it's all in my studio. And I don't suppose you'd care to drop in there some day?"

"I'm not in the habit of 'dropping in at strangers' studios," she reminded him. Yet some floating aroma of adventure quickened her pulse.

"Of course you're not," he agreed. "But I was wondering if we couldn't make it a sort of a business-meeting, say for some off Sunday. I'd give an arm to get that tan and gardenia tone down against the right background."

The gardenia slowly deepened to a pale rose. There was something unmistakably arresting about this eccentric artist with the slightly abashed eyes. And the aroma of romance thickened about Miss Fifty-Seven.

"Sunday's my only free day," she finally acknowledged.

The abashed eyes blinked meditatively behind the thick glasses.

"I was going down to Long Island for the weekend. But I can cut that. Couldn't I phone my married sister to run in from Morristown on Sun-

day, to be a sort of floor-walker while we're finishing up our crumpets and tea?"

Tess's thoughtful eyes studied his face. There was an air of honesty about it that she liked. And he could help her, she remembered, in the things where she most needed help.

"I'll leave that to you," she said, unsettled as to which course seemed the more advantageous. But it was a new friendship, and a new friendship meant a new chance.

"Then we'll make it Sunday afternoon at two. My name's Brandt, Robert Brandt, and my studio's the third from the corner in Washington Square South. Is that a bargain?"

She nodded, almost shyly, embarrassed at the discovery that he was solemnly shaking hands with her. Her embarrassment increased as he continued to hold her hand, while his intent yet impersonal eyes continued their study of her face. And it attained the boiling point when she happened to look beyond Brandt and discovered a pair of tired brown eyes raised in slightly mocking surprise at both of them and a drawling voice warning, "Flirting with my employees is strictly prohibited."

She was frightened for an instant, and then she saw that the owner of the brown eyes, a tall, slightly stooped young man carelessly well dressed in a mod-

est business suit and bareheaded, was fooling. Brandt had turned away from her to face the intruder, and the latter now addressed him chidingly, "So this is why you disappeared from my office, Bob, when dad sent for me. That's a great stunt—offer to blow me to lunch, and then beat it away as soon as my back is turned and hide in my basement. Not only that, but ruin the discipline of my store by inflicting yourself on one of my young ladies to whom you have certainly never been introduced."

"I just introduced myself. Thought I'd have a look around while I waited for you, you know, and—"

"Then introduce me."

"All—right. Miss—er—"

Tess, now enjoying the encounter, told him her name.

"Miss McGuire, this is Charles Thorndyke, junior partner in this establishment by the grace of luck and a wealthy father."

Thorndyke scrutinized her with lazy and careful boldness.

"Well, I must admit, old man, you have excellent taste. And now shall we go to lunch?"

Brandt turned back to her as Thorndyke started away, ventured a timid smile and said, "I hope this

rude interruption hasn't made you forget our appointment. I'm looking forward to it."

"So am I," she smiled, not without a bit of coquetry in it, and was rather gratified that Thorn-dyke looked back also as the two men disappeared around the corner of the pots and pans section.

She was still smiling over the further discovery that Mr. Robert Brandt had forgotten both his parcel and his change when she looked up to see Jim Hogan standing close beside her counter. His eyes were unexpectedly dark with resentment as he stared after the departing figures, one with the cane crooked over his elbow and the other swaggering carelessly with the air of one who was monarch of all he surveyed.

"You seem to be starting well," Jim said with a note of bitterness which took the smile from the face of Miss Fifty-Seven.

"Not so badly," she said with self-protective levity. Then, willing to forgive the unjustifiable harshness in his greeting in the unexpected pleasure of seeing him, she asked, "How do you happen to be down this way, Jim?"

"I delivered a repair job in the neighborhood," he explained, still sulkily. "But I seem to have dropped in at a bad time."

She flushed and her violet eyes narrowed danger-

ously. If Jim thought he could bully her away from other men—

She recovered quickly and said, as the suspicious-eyed Mr. Moysey bore down on them: "You'd better buy something quick, or I'll end up before I've really got started."

"I'll take that camisole thing," asserted the morose-eyed Jim. "But is it a practise in this store to hold a customer's hand after a purchase?"

Tess did not answer him. He seemed, of a sudden, very far away from her.

"Are you going to stay in this dump?" he inquired after a glance about the counters of shopworn merchandise. And the panther-like Mr. Moysey started perceptibly at that opprobrious epithet of "dump."

"Of course not," was her somewhat unexpected reply. "I'm going to stay here only until I can move on to something better."

The morose look in Jim's eye merged into one of hunger.

"Then why not move on to me," he suggested. "I'm making good at my new job, and I've been promised a substantial raise in six months. That means, even if my carburetor doesn't come through, we could move into one of those Ninety-Eighth Street apartments any day now, and save enough

for a place of our own in Mt. Vernon before this town gets us both."

Tess, with her eyes half-closed, was remembering the crowded and colorful panorama of Fifth Avenue as one looks up the long slope of Murray Hill. And it did not seem the sort of place to "get" one, to burn one's soul away, as Jim lugubriously predicted.

"I think New York is wonderful," she said with a slow shake of her head. "And I think you are wonderful, Jim. But there's something big and untried here that I can't seem to turn away from. It's like going up a hill you've never gone up before, a hill where you could see almost anything from the top. And I'd always feel cheated if I didn't go up that hill—and go up on my own feet."

Jim, without looking at it, took the parcel which she handed to him.

"But supposing it doesn't lead to what you're looking for?" he demanded, trying to enclose her hand in his.

"It won't—but I'm on my way," she retorted with one of her self-defensive flippancies.

"Then remember that I'm waiting, when you're tired of the climb," he told her, so quietly that she scarcely suspected the valorous effort it was costing him.

Her eyes thanked him as he turned away. She loved him, she knew, for his loyalty, for his patience, for that dogged devotion which had survived the turbulent quarrels of high school days. But there was one side of her that Jim could never understand.

She sighed as she refolded three ruffled pieces of lingerie which an angular woman with hennaed hair had disdainfully inspected and thrust aside. Miss Fifty-Seven was scarcely conscious of the feline movement of Mr. Moysey as he turned and stooped over her discarded sales-book. It was not until she noticed the pink flesh above the constricting wing-collar mysteriously darken to a dull magenta that she realized he was intent on an inspection of a carbon copy of his own caricatured figure.

Slowly he drew himself up to full height.

“And who is this supposed to be?” he demanded, confronting her with the fatal page.

Miss Fifty-Seven felt the blood mount to her face.

“It’s just a drawing,” she feebly contended, vaguely disturbed by inarticulate noises coming from Pinkie Doran’s averted face.

“You may find it a somewhat expensive one,” announced the indignant aisle-man as he slowly deleted the obnoxious page from the pad.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” murmured the girl,

with downcast eyes. "I wouldn't do that, for the world!"

But humility was a salve too thin for a hurt so deep.

"Kindly bear in mind, Miss McGuire, that our projected evening at the Cameo Theater is now a thing of the past," Mr. Moysey proclaimed with all the dignity at his command.

The bruised violet eyes watched him as he turned away.

"And you may not climb out of this *dump*," he added as he swung about on her again, "as quickly as some of your friends would like to see you."

Miss Fifty-Seven watched the controller of her destinies as he passed down between his brightly laden counters. Then she sighed, for the second time in one afternoon. These men who were so willing to hold out a hand to you didn't always help you, after all, as much as they promised.



## CHAPTER XI

WHEN, the following Sunday, Robert Brandt admitted the rapt-eyed and slightly tremulous Tess to his Washington Square Studio he noticed an unmistakable shade of disappointment creep over her face. He thought, at first, that this was because she had found him alone in his bachelor quarters, and he was unnecessarily explicit in his explanations of why his married sister had failed to put in an appearance from Morristown. But Tess saw her spirit of high adventure dashed by quite another circumstance. For one quick and eager glance about the room persuaded her she was not to be confronted by the splendor which she had vaguely expected in such a place. It impressed her, in fact, as a chamber of rather crowded shabbiness, harboring things that looked dishearteningly old, old bronzes and old tapestries and old furniture. And the studio itself, with its stained easels and worn dummies and littered draughting-tables, took on the general air of a work-room none too carefully kept.

She sat chilled and quiet as Brandt made tea in a somewhat battered samovar which, he explained,

he had picked up somewhere in the Ukraine. She betrayed the honest appetite of youth before his buttered crumpets and cinnamon-toast, but she remained oddly self-immured until he ventured to show her a few of the things, "the little things," as he phrased it, which he had been working on.

Her instinctive feeling for art told her there were both power and beauty in those paintings of his. And before the accumulating knowledge of his skill her coolness slowly fell away from her. Her earlier vague sense of having been cheated out of something vanished as he confronted her with the canvas of a eager-eyed ballet-dancer caught in a graceful pose.

"That's beautiful," she acknowledged, with an involuntary catch of the breath. And Brandt's own face lighted up a little at the genuineness of her tribute.

"That's called *The Ballet Dancer*," he explained. "It's one of a four-panel series I'm doing for the lobby of the new Art Theater that's to be started this winter. My second is to be *Comedy*—the same girl with head thrown back and laughing, hair running riot and whole body expressing light-hearted abandon, but still with a little note of pathos shading through all her vivacity—eternal, joyous youth with pathos lurking just around the corner."

“That ought to be equally wonderful,” ventured the violet-eyed girl at his side, not altogether at home in regions so remote.

“I think I could make it that, with your help,” was Brandt’s retort.

His words sent a tingle of nerve-ends scampering up and down Tess’s body. She had been wondering if it was true that success, after all, did not bring one happiness.

“How could I help you?” she asked, smiling at the intent look with which he was studying her face.

“By being very uncomfortable for a few hours,” was his answer. “By putting on this costume and standing very still. I mean, by being exactly what you are at this very moment.”

“But what am I?” she asked, coloring a little and not for the moment looking at the flimsy costume he offered her.

He shrugged his shoulders in a sign of helplessness.

“I don’t think I could say it, in words. It’s a sort of mixture of being ardent and determined and innately pure, of being young and untried and at the same time the acme of studied grace and poise. It’s that and something more I can’t quite put into words. The only way I could express it, I imagine, would be on canvas.”

"But how do you know I'd do?" she asked, her elation sobered with a touch of disappointment at an interest in her that seemed more professional than personal.

"Let's try," he suggested, as she stood hesitantly, the gauzy draperies still in a rumpled bundle in her hands. "You can change your clothes behind that screen over there."

She shook out the costume and inspected it, and as she did so a warm flush started spreading slowly over her face. She looked at it again, somewhat blankly as if wondering if there were not more to it than appeared at first glance. There was a richly brocaded band to fit snugly across her breast, a pair of abbreviated tights, and a long skirt of very light, diaphanous material—and that was all!

"Isn't there more—to it—than this?" she asked in a very small voice.

"Ballet dancers don't burden themselves with clothes," he explained impatiently, anxious to get to his work. Then, evidently remembering that he wasn't dealing with a professional model, he added more kindly, "You'll get used to it. Meantime, I'll call my landlady and have her stand by while you're changing and posing, if you like."

"Oh, I don't mind," she answered with a little reckless toss of her head and retired behind the

screen with her scandalous burden. But when, having cast aside her conventional attire, she had draped her white body scantily with the meager chest-strip, the tiny tights and the flowing skirt that revealed every contour of her sleek slim legs, she was covered far more fully with embarrassment than with clothes. She surveyed herself in the full-length mirror that formed one panel of the screen that concealed her from him, and wondered if the blushes that surged in waves into her cheeks were too self-revelatory. True, she had often gone swimming with Todd and other men with rather less on than this. But somehow it was different now. But why? She could not expect to pose as a ballet-dancer in a fur coat and spats. And, mingled with her uneasiness, was the steady confidence and pride, as she glimpsed the sweep of her graceful exposed body from the top of her burnished-brown head to the curve of her pink heel, that he would see in her all that he had hoped and prophesied.

And so, having remained behind the screen so long that he was irritably afraid she had faked and was going to disappoint him, she now stepped out. She emerged with a nonchalance that surprised even herself, and faced him smilingly.

“Now stand on that dais,” he ordered, pointing to the little raised platform draped with black velvet.

“Put your weight on the ball of your right foot and stretch your hands out to either side, so. As if you were in the midst of a dance.” His hands touched her impersonally as he steadied her into the pose. Then he stepped back.

He turned deliberately away. He was so wholly absorbed in getting on with his painting, so apparently unaware of her warm revealed loveliness that, all of her shyness and fear calmed, she was even a bit disappointed. No wonder, she thought, that professional models, even those accustomed to posing in the nude, became so blasé about their unusual means of livelihood.

He fussed for a moment or two with the skylight curtains. At length he turned, studying her with narrowed eyes as he backed away to where his easel stood.

“That’s wonderful,” he said in a sort of gasp. “God, if I could only get that down before our light goes! Could you hold it, exactly as you are?”

“I’ll try,” Tess told him, infected by his excitement, for the first time, as he fell to blocking out his canvas.

Yet he became oddly calm as he worked. He came to her side, once, to tilt up the chin. When she announced that she was tired he flung aside his palette and laughed foolishly and tossing her a

dressing-gown told her to rest. Then he brought her a glass of rather sour-tasting wine and laughed again, after which he absorbedly inspected his paint-smearred canvas and fell to pacing a cleared spot along the studio floor.

“My dear, you’re a God-sent angel,” he solemnly asserted as he came to a stop before where she sat with her shoulders slightly drooping under the weight of her weariness. “You’re giving me something I can never pay you back for.”

“But you *can* pay me back,” she reminded him as he returned to his easel and studied the unfinished picture.

“How?” he asked as he stepped toward her again.

“Perhaps we could make it an exchange of services,” she suggested, her smile more provocative than she had intended it to be.

He stopped short, at that, with an odd darkening of the eyes behind the big lenses.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked, almost combatively. And she was able to smile again at the note of hostility in his voice.

“I mean that I want to know a little more about art, about drawing and modeling. And if I can help you by posing, perhaps you could help me by criticism.”

This seemed to puzzle him.

“But where’d we get a chance for that, if you’re engaged with other work?”

“My evenings are free,” she explained. “At least some of them,” she amended. “And if you have to do your painting by daylight, I could give you my Sundays.”

He stood looking down at her, without moving. It was very quiet in the studio, where the diffused light glinted on the metallic trimming of her breast-strip showing through the open dressing-gown.

“That would be wonderful,” he said with a short intake of the breath. “But it might also be dangerous.”

“Why dangerous?” she innocently inquired.

He put a hand on her sparsely draped shoulder.

“Because, my dear, you have that mysterious something which was probably at the foot of the Trojan war, if you get what I mean.”

“I don’t,” she protested, permitting her gaze to look with his.

“No, you wouldn’t,” he meditatively acknowledged. He moved back a step or two, with a gesture that seemed almost defensive. Then he stared frowningly about at the thinning light.

“Let’s work,” he said, almost brusksly, as he returned to his easel. And she smiled faintly as she dropped her protective covering and once more took



up the pose he had asked for. She had forged a new link in her chain of friendships. He would be like the others, when the time for it was ripe. He would make love to her, as the others had done. And through that mysterious something he had spoken of she would hold and claim his friendship.

Yet it piqued her a trifle, when she stole a glance at his preoccupied face, to find Brandt so immured in his brush-work. To him, at the moment, she was merely a series of tones and planes which the diminishing light was slowly taking away from his repeated assessing scrutiny. He was still working against time, in fact, when his door was flung open and a man in a raglan strode unceremoniously into the room.

"You moiling ant!" he loudly proclaimed as his eye fell on the man at the easel. Then his eye traveled on to Tess, a little pale with fatigue on the model-throne.

"Who's the pippin in tights?" Abruptly he recognized her and added, "Gad, Bob, you work fast. You worm yourself into the confidence of the fairest of my staff and then you lure her here to your den."

Tess turned to see if it was really Thorndyke who was speaking with such regal offhandedness, and verified her guess. Fighting down quite success-

fully her embarrassment at this new complication, she gave him a casual smile of welcome. She wanted him to infer that she did this sort of thing out of working hours and did it as a matter of course.

Tess could, however, see Brandt's frown of resentment as he put down his brushes. She did not catch the word or two that passed between the men. But the newcomer's manner was still depressingly preoccupied as he nodded to her and inquired of his host just what there was about the place to drink.

It was not until Brandt had produced a bottle, which he described as Barbara straight from the Taormina, that the newcomer proclaimed himself. To his friends, including Tess, he was "Chip Thorn-dyke." And there was little hope for Brandt, added the man with the glass, if his host's taste in art was no better than his taste in hootch.

Tess, studying Thorndyke as he drank, tried not to dislike him. His face was lean and sun-browned and athletic-looking, and at the back of his audacious eyes always seemed to burn a faint glimmer of amusement. But he was not yet really conscious of her existence. And that was a disappointment to her. She had to snatch at acquaintances, she knew, as a brook-trout snatches at food. She still had to

take what the currents of chance brought to her. Except for Jim, she was detached and alone, in that city of strangers, with no connections and no claim to a background. She had to web into that fabric, careful thread by thread, where each new friend meant a newer sense of security.

So she was not guiltless of a deliberate effort to stir the lethargic Chip Thorndyke out of his indifference. She let her eyes meet his, openly, as she declined his proffered cigarette. She turned the soft artillery of her smile on him as he sat smoking in Brandt's black-oak armchair. And when she found the room growing close and allowed the dressing-gown to fall away from her warm neck she noticed his wavering eyes finally focus and fix on the gardenia-white of her throat and shoulders.

"Are you a model when you're not working for me?" he asked as he picked up her fallen handkerchief and restored it to her hand. He half laughingly clamped her fingers about the clustered cambric, as though intimating that it should not again be dropped.

"No, she's not," Brandt promptly answered for her.

"And you don't want to go on the stage," pursued Thorndyke, ignoring the other man, "or have a fling at the movies?"

"I wanted to, but they didn't want me," she countered, not unconscious of the derisive note in his voice.

"It's what ardent youth usually pants for," he lightly proclaimed.

"I pride myself on being rather practical-minded."

He stopped short, with the bottle of Barbara in his hand, and studied her.

"I believe you are," he finally admitted. "And you'd need to be, in this burg!" He waited, with his watch in his hand, frowning a little at the flush that came and went from her face. "What are we doing to-night?" he asked, carelessly enough, but with a gesture, Tess noticed, which unmistakably included her.

The ensuing silence was not without its significance. And Brandt made no effort to bridge the chasm.

"I never dreamed it was so late," ventured Tess, with a glance at the faded old banjo-clock above the cast-strewn mantel. She and Jim, she guiltily remembered, were to have a frugal dinner together at an Italian *table d'hôte* and then go for an experimental ride in a borrowed car in which he had been busy all day installing the carburetor that was to make his fortune, and hers, if she chose.

It was Chip Thorndyke, she noticed with a second

small wave of triumph, who first came over to her as she reappeared from behind the screen in her street attire. And when she explained that she would have to be up-town within half an hour Thorndyke wearily announced that he had his bus at the door and would run her up if she wanted a lift.

Brandt's frown of displeasure did not escape her as she accepted that offer. Her spirits rose perceptibly, however, as she shook hands with her host and let Thorndyke pilot her down the dark hallways and seat her in a coffee-colored speed-roadster, long and low and oddly duplicating the debonair aspect of its owner.

"How about a rickey?" he companionably inquired as they sped up the twilit avenue, shoulder to shoulder in the low seats.

Tess shook her head. It was the first time, she remembered, that she had ever traversed New York in a private motor-car. And the moment was not without its glamour.

"Where are you going?" he asked as they arrowed northward under the blinking colored lights.

"You'd better drop me at the Astor," she suggested. She was pathetically anxious to say this as airily as possible, though it would mark the first time she had been in that plush-lined hostelry. The

garage from which Jim was getting the car was on Forty-fifth Street, and he had suggested meeting her near the entranceway at the north side to the hotel. "But haven't we passed Forty-fifth Street?" she asked suddenly.

"I'm going by a little private way of my own," he lightly explained. "Now, tell me about yourself," he said as they swung into the park.

"I'd much rather hear about you," she countered, feeling the weight of his arm against her breast as they swerved about a sharper turn of the driveway.

"The only important thing about me," he said with his careless laugh, "is that I'm aching to run you down to Pierre's for dinner."

"It couldn't be done," she replied, also laughing. It was as he leaned closer to her that she added a qualifying: "Not to-night."

"That leaves me something to live for," he amended as they turned south again. "Where'll I be able to find you?"

"Well, I run a bargain-counter in the basement of your store," she laughed.

"Why waste your sweetness on that desert air?" he lightly inquired.

"Why shouldn't I?" was her counter-inquiry.

"Because you're altogether too adorable," he proclaimed, lifting one hand from the wheel. He had

been indifferent to her, at first. But she knew, now, even before his next movement, that he was going to kiss her.

It was an aerial and oblique and unsatisfactory kiss, snatched on the wing, but it prompted him to pat her knee with fraternal approval. Her eye, resting on the dash-board stippled with burnished metal, harvested from that prospect an impression of richness, of richness touched with power. And she found it hard to reprove him.

"You must never do that again," she said as she lifted her eyes and studied his face. He merely laughed at her solemnity.

"All right," he agreed. "You've got to believe in me, if we're going to play around together."

"I'd have to," she quietly asserted. And that sobered him. But only for a minute or two.

"Some night soon," he proclaimed, "we're going to take this old bus and run out to Westbury. I know a quiet little place out there where we can have a grouse dinner and dance and motor in by moonlight. No, don't put on that startled gazelle look! It's a perfectly respectable place patronized by perfectly respectable people. You'll be sitting next to some of the best-known names in this sedate old city of ours. And you'll love it."

He did not wait for an answer as he swerved in

to the carriage-entrance of the Astor. He didn't even seem to expect one.

"So long," he said with his habitual lounging carelessness. "My duty will call me down to the basement, remember, in a day or two."

Tess did not answer him. For as they drew up at the curb she caught sight of Jim's disconsolate figure standing on the hot Astor steps. And Jim's startled eyes were on her as she got down from the running-board of the rakish-looking roadster. She ran up the steps to him, with a perfunctory backward wave of the hand to the man at the wheel. She even smiled contritely as she detected a faint note of hostility on the younger man's face.

"Oh, Jim, I'm late," she admitted with a child-like clutch at his coat-sleeve.

"Only fifty-five minutes!" was Jim's grim rejoinder. His face was equally grim as he stared after the departing roadster.

"Who's that?" he demanded.

"That's Chip Thorndyke, who was kind enough to give me a lift up from Washington Square."

"What were you doing down there, anyway?"

That, Tess remembered, was the trouble in trying to have more friends than one. There was an unreasoning and appropriative sort of selfishness about men, a selfishness that left one friendship



always threatening to neutralize the other. And Tess's first impulse, displeased as she stood at the proprietary note in Jim's voice, was to confront him with the disturbingly bald truth, scandalous costume and all. Instead of that, however, she caught him by the arm and swung him half-patiently and half-imperially about.

"Look at me," she commanded, with an achieved tenderness in her eyes. "Are you still angry with me?"

"What were you doing in Washington Square?" he repeated, his tone less granite-like, nevertheless, as he gazed down into the pools of stippled violet.

"Why, I told you I was going to take an art-lesson," she explained, doing her best to keep her little tumult of excitement under cover. "And I'm going to have more of them, every Sunday!"

His face hardened again.

"But don't you see, Jim, how much more this will mean to me?" she asked as her narrowed eyes studied his face. "It may give me a chance to do something with my drawing."

"I wish to God your drawing was at the bottom of the Hudson," he said as he moved on again in response to her tug. "And what's more, I can't see you getting much good out of that Greenwich Village truck!"

She studied him for the second time.

“Jim, you need a hair-cut,” she said with a restorative sort of irrelevance. But it wasn’t until she had relinked her arm through his and pressed closer to his side in the Broadway traffic that she detected any softening of his eyes.

## CHAPTER XII

**T**ESS, during the ensuing weeks, found an odd tide of excitement rising and eddying about her, crowding her day with movement and sending her bone-tired to bed in Mrs. Binner's sulphur-colored second-floor front. She also found herself immersed in an equally odd shifting of values. She felt, as she grew less timid in her contact with others and more sophisticated in all matters of apparel, that she was slowly becoming citified.

She watched and recorded and frugally extended her little urbanized treasury of wisdom. She became more penurious and at the same time more prodigal, taking discreet advantage of the department-store's twenty per cent. discount to its clerks and curbing her appetite for food to indulge a new-found appetite for clothes. Even her earlier distaste for the tarnished magnificence which she doled out to the casual bargain-seeker seemed to pass away, and she became less intolerant of the intimacies of the ever-talkative Pinkie, who had astutely remarked Jim Hogan's continued hovering about the doorway at closing time, one day, and Carl Gar-

retson's explorative visit to the Thorndyke basement, the next day.

"Keep 'em danglin', dearie," was Pinkie's prompt advice. "You've gotta let 'em pet you a little, I'd also add, or you don't get a look in. Watch your step, but don't go slow. For times is changed, birdie, since grand-maw swooned when grand-paw kissed her on the lace mitten. They've got things speeded up since them stage-coach days, and if you want to step with the procession you've gotta acquire a twin-six gait. And you're dead right, dearie, about not wastin' time on the pikers. Go after the big game, and when you make your killin' you've got something to carry you through to the next open season in spenders."

"I could never be nice to a man," asserted Tess, "if I didn't really care for him. Even if I cared for him, I'd see that he treated me with respect."

"You'll stow that hay-tosser stuff when you get to be a little more of a Noo-Yawker," contended the cynical Pinkie. "You're young yet, dearie, and you ain't wise to the ways of this big city. What we all want is a MAN, tied up and ready to take home. But men are so gun-shy in this vamp-ridden burg you've sure gotta chloroform 'em with something stronger'n flattery before you can get the cuffs on 'em."

“But it’s not men I want,” protested the ruminative-eyed Miss Fifty-Seven. “What I want is to get out of a bargain-counter basement.”

“Well, it’s men who’ll get you out,” averred Pinkie. “They’re the steppin’ stones, darn ’em, by which we rise to higher things. And you were the wise baby to eat crow with Mista Moysey this morning. You’ve got him weakenin’. But as I know Jerry, it’ll take a long season o’ remorse to make up for givin’ that rim-cut to his dignity. And you played the right card, kid, when you pulled your timid-doe stuff on young Mr. Thorndyke yesterday. You’re the only skirt in this cellar who’s ever got ten minutes out o’ the boss’s busy day. And we sure lose nothin’ by havin’ a night-line or two set out for a haul!”

Tess resented that over-frank exposition of her aims.

“I’m not asking for favors,” she contended. “I want to play fair, if they’ll only let me.”

“But what’re you goin’ to give ’em, for value received?” inquired the cool-eyed Pinkie.

“What do other girls give men who are nice to them?” demanded Miss Fifty-Seven.

“Here’s a sugar-baby that’s supposed to know something about that,” remarked Pinkie, with a glance down the aisle. “Ask him.”

Tess looked up to see Chip Thorndyke bearing urbanely down on her.

Pinkie discreetly withdrew to the other end of the counter as, with a reconnoitering look around, he approached Tess.

"How about running up to Clairmont to dinner to-night?" he asked in a low voice, endeavoring to give the appearance to the rest of the basement of merely questioning Miss Fifty-Seven quite properly about a detail of her work.

"I'd love to," said Tess, oblivious to Pinkie's excited eye.

Yet during that drive up to Clairmont and during that dinner she was conscious of a disturbing new element in the situation. It was something that left her thoughtful at the touch of his fingers against her flesh, at the half-humorous look of hunger in his eyes.

"Let's drop in and look over my apartment," he suggested after the run down Riverside Drive. And she knew, then, that the vague menace was disclosing itself.

"Thank you," she coolly retorted. "But this isn't that kind of a party."

He laughed, apparently without resentment. "Little igloo!" he murmured, disturbing her more than ever by the lightness with which he had taken her



*A Paramount Picture.*

TESSA POSES AS A RUSSIAN COUNTESS AT THE STUDIO PARTY.

*Manhandled.*





rebuff. "Then where do you want to go from here?"

"I want to go home," she proclaimed, puzzled by the heaviness about her heart. And Thorndyke took her home, with a tenderness quite new to him, finding her more desirable because she had been denied him. He even showed small concern over the shabbiness of the district into which she had so valorously piloted him.

"We're going to be friends, good friends," he proclaimed with unexpected solemnity as he shook hands with her. "And to do that we've got to believe in each other."

Yet it was of Bob Brandt she thought most as another Sunday drew near. He was companionable and he was without that tingling sense of peril which could give deeper meanings to casual words and movements. She could console herself, too, with the thought that she was giving Brandt something in return for his friendship. And her color was high as she once more arrayed herself in her abbreviated raiment of brocade and chiffon and mounted the model-throne.

"Chip Thorndyke tells me," said Brandt as he worked, "that you've been dining with him. How do you like him?"

"He seems very nice."

“Yes, that’s the dangerous part of it,” asserted Brandt, still bent over his palette. “You understand, of course, that he’s a married man?”

Tess’s heart tightened. It even took an effort to hide the sudden sense of betrayal that possessed her. Life, after all, had so many roads that led nowhere.

“He never mentioned his wife,” said the stricken-eyed girl on the model-throne.

“He wouldn’t,” was Brandt’s rather grim retort.

“You don’t like him,” proclaimed Tess, on the defensive.

“It’s more that I don’t want you to,” asserted the man at the easel. “As I’ve told you before, you’re a trifle different from the rest.”

“How am I different?” she asked.

“You’ve got judgment,” he disappointed her by saying.

“Then you’d advise me not to motor out to Westbury with Chip Thorndyke?” she asked in a spirit of retaliation.

“That’s for you to decide,” was all he would admit. Then he remained silent for a minute or two.

“By the way, what do they pay you at the store?”

“Eighteen dollars a week,” admitted Tess.

“Why?”

“Can you get along on that?” he impersonally inquired.

"Why?" repeated the girl.

"Because I can nail down a jobber's order for hand-painted place-cards at six dollars a dozen. They'd have to be humorous and original in design, of course, though they could be duplicated in every series of fifty. I thought, from what I saw of your line-work, you'd possibly like to tackle a thing like that. Would you?"

"I'd love to!" she cried. And the weight was already gone from her heart.

"A girl needs clothes and things," said Brandt with a vague gesture. "You could almost double your store money, if you really worked. Is the room where you live big enough for that sort of thing?"

Tess shook her head.

"It's a cubby-hole of a second-floor bedroom," she dolorously admitted.

"Then I could spare you a corner of this work-room of mine," he casually announced. "I'll dig out some water-colors and let you have that table there. And I suppose I'd better have another pass-key cut, for there'll be plenty of evenings when I'm not around."

"Then it wouldn't be so nice," she promptly and significantly asserted.

"Save that for Chip Thorndyke," was his brusque

retort. "This is a business arrangement and if you're going to enter into it you've got to do it in a business way."

Her color deepened.

"I'll try not to disappoint you," she said in a voice so constrained that he looked sharply at her.

"Oh, hell, don't imagine I'm not human," he broke out. He was pacing the floor by this time. "I'm no better than the rest of them. Only I'm a little more cowardly."

She liked him for that speech, and she let him know it.

"I'd trust you anywhere," she said with her sober young eyes on his. And it was his turn to color a little.

"Would you now?" he said, half in mockery. He flung down his brushes. "Then let's go up to the Byzantium roof and have dinner and a fox-trot. I'm tired of trying to get my Egyptian dancer to look exultant to-day."

Tess enjoyed her evening on the Byzantium roof, though she had suffered a few pangs of conscience while she was donning her carefully preserved party-dress in her stuffy bedroom and thought of Jim toiling hot and alone over his greasy, baffling carburetor in the garage farther down-town.

She enjoyed the dinner Brandt adroitly ordered.

She enjoyed the music and the thought of being in the midst of people who looked important. But most of all she enjoyed the dancing. Brandt saw, from the first, that she danced for the sheer love of dancing, lightly and indefatigably, with little personal thought of her partner as she floated through measure after measure. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes brightened with excitement. She was eager to know the name of the pearl-draped actress who came in late. She was equally interested in the claret-cheeked elderly gentleman accompanying the tired-eyed star who looked young only at a distance.

“That’s Luther Swett, the Wall Street banker,” explained Brandt in answer to her question. “He’d give ten millions, I suppose, to be ten years younger.”

“He’s bowing to you,” Tess murmured in a voice that made Bob laugh.

“The old beggar’s doing more,” muttered her companion. “He’s coming over here. So you’ve got to decide mighty quick whether you’re going to dance with him or not.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” she asked, remembering the casual reference to millions.

“Well, you’ve been warned,” murmured Brandt, who turned to shake hands with the newcomer.

The newcomer reminded Tess of a rubicund and blithe-mannered old robin, with a small shrewd eye in a massive face not without power. He impressed her, as he led her triumphantly out to the dancing-floor, as urbane and fatherly and just a little ridiculous in his pretenses toward a youth so regretfully lost. Yet he danced amazingly well, for a man of his girth, and his partner was not unconscious of the eyes bent upon her as they fox-trotted up and down the polished floor. This was different, she remembered, from refolding shop-worn *crêpe-de-chine* on a basement counter. And it was catching at the glamour of life to have a Wall Street millionaire tell you that you danced like a wave of the sea, whatever that might mean.

“We all deserve a bit of sparkling burgundy after that,” proclaimed her mellow-eyed partner. “Come on, Verlyna and Brandt; we’re going to wet our whistles.”

The burgundy, served in coffee-cups, gave Tess odd tingles in her finger-tips. But it was even more intoxicating to find herself sitting across the table from Verlyna Charette, whose name flowered nightly over Broadway in framed electric bulbs. When Brandt explained that Miss McGuire was a bit of an artist, he borrowed a pencil from the waiter and had her do a thumb-nail sketch of the star, which

Luther Swett inspected with pursed-up lips and passed smilingly on to Miss Charette, who insisted on keeping it and proclaiming its maker a wonder.

Under the influence of the festive surroundings and the contraband alcohol, even Brandt's repressed spirits began to soar.

"How about adjourning to my diggings to replenish the hootch?" Swett proposed at length, with his autumnal smile directed invitingly toward Tess. "My car and chauffeur are outside."

"Better still," Bob cut in with unaccustomed gaiety, "let's whirl around to my studio and pull a party in a setting of art. We can get some others in."

Tess, a little flushed from the burgundy, was being swept along with the reckless tide. "We could phone Chip Thorndyke."

Bob hesitated. Then, "All right, though I doubt he's home. And whom shall we get for him?"

Tess's motive was not devoid of mischief as she suggested Pinkie Doran. Without asking embarrassing questions, Bob agreed, and they deserted Swett and his companion temporarily for tobacco-soaked phone booths.

Luckily both Pinkie and Thorndyke were available. To save time, it was agreed that Swett's limousine was to pick up Chip, while Brandt and

the excited-eyed Tess piled into a taxi and set off for Pinkie.

Once alone with her in the dark depths of the lurching taxi, Brandt's eagerness for the projected fun seemed to cool, and he lapsed into a silence which Tess did not fancy.

"Mr. Swett's rather a dear, isn't he?" asked the happy-eyed girl.

"He's a devastating old satyr," Brandt retorted, with unexpected savagery. "And I'm sorry it's happened."

"Sorry what happened?" she asked as she slipped a hand through his arm.

"That that old scalp-hunter should be interested in you."

"Don't you think I'm able to take care of myself?" she finally demanded.

Brandt apparently found that question no easy one to answer.

"It all depends on what you mean by taking care of yourself," he explained. "Some girls seem to take care of themselves too carefully, if you get what I'm driving at. They want protection, but they have to pay so much for it, sometimes, that there's nothing much left to protect. They want splendid settings for their pinched little drama of



pleasure, and to get that they lose the only splendid thing life's given them."

She leaned back, slightly chilled by that pronouncement.

"And do you think I'm that small and selfish?" she found the courage to ask.

"I think you're young and impressionable," he countered. "And I'd hate to see this city soil your freshness."

"Isn't that something that goes anyway?" she said with a self-defensive little laugh.

"Well, it doesn't help any to have it too freely handled. It's like those things you sell down in Thorndyke's. It gets soiled and shoddy and second-hand."

She withdraw her hand from his arm.

"But is that any worse," she demanded, "than staying on the shelf?"

"*You* never will," he evaded. He was able to laugh a little at the note of fierceness in her voice.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, with the glamour gone from her day.

"Because you're so darned adorable," was his altogether unsatisfactory reply. And her heart lightened a little as he recaptured her hand and thrust it in under his elbow.

They rode on in a companionable silence for several minutes.

"It's hard to know, isn't it, what really helps us in this muddle called life?" Brandt meditated aloud.

"Why do you say that?" asked Tess as a small shiver of weariness went through her body. Her day and the night so far had been rather long and strenuous.

"Well, take you and those paintings of mine," pursued the man at her side. "If it hadn't been for you I'd never have done over my *Ballet Dancer*. I got you at just the right moment for that. I captured you when you still had all the innocent freshness of youth in your body."

"And do you think I've lost that?" demanded the girl.

"You've got poise in your head instead, and you're learning life isn't all sunshine. That's what I tried to get in my figure of *Comedy*—laughter with the hint of a tear behind it. And now that's off the skids I want to tackle *Tragedy*, the maiden with the heart and head bowed down. But I don't see how you're going to help me much with that picture."

"Why not?" she asked, wondering a little at the wintriness of his laugh.

"Because you're too dog-goned triumphant just

at present," he said with an effort at flippancy. "For that, my dear, I'd have to get you when somebody's just kicked your apple-cart over!"

Her laugh was short but self-defensive.

"But I don't intend to have that happen," she announced. Then, as the taxi swerved in toward the curb and came to a screaming stop, she regained her blithe spirits and cried, "Here's Pinkie's mansion. Better let me dash up and get her, Bob. You'd break your neck on those awful stairs!"

Brandt, from the hooded gloom of the taxi, failed to answer her. He was thinking, not of the words from her lips, but of the lips themselves.

## CHAPTER XIII

WHEN they arrived at the rather dingy brownstone front in which Brandt's studio was located, Swett's shiny limousine was already parked at the curb. He and Verlyna embarked as the taxi eased up in the rear of the statelier car, and the excited Pinkie, who had donned her gaudiest evening wrap and had been dissuaded from spending a half-hour curling her fluffy hair anew only on the threat of being deserted, gasped audibly at being presented to the opulent millionaire and his famous companion. Then the quartette scurried up the narrow, musty stairs to Brandt's apartment.

On the first landing, Brandt, who had by this time recovered the somewhat disturbing, devil-may-care look in his deep black eyes with which he had first proposed the party, turned to Tess, pointed to a door and explained, "Here's where Dale James and Ann Patterson, the *Follies* dancers, hang out. Shall I ask them up if they're in?"

"That would be nice," she enthused, impressed at the offhand manner in which he bandied about such celebrated names.

He pounded on the door and was almost at once

rewarded by seeing it open a bit. A dark, merry little feminine face in a setting of dusky bobbed curls peered out inquiringly.

"I'm giving a party, Ann," Bob saluted her carelessly. "You and Dale dash up and join us."

"I'll see, Bob," she answered and, turning, said something rapidly to an invisible person inside the room. A male voice rumbled, and she turned brightly to Brandt and Tess and said, "We're tired and we're not dressed, but if you don't mind a doddering old married couple sitting around and watching the fun, we'll be up in a few minutes."

"Righto," from Brandt, and taking Tess's arm he piloted her rapidly the rest of the journey, two steps at a time. "They're really married, you know," he commented, almost breathless from the rollicking pace yet seeming to feel that he ought to explain. "But of course they're neither doddering nor ancient. She's twenty and he's about five years older. Good scouts, both of them."

Tess felt suddenly that she too ought to produce somebody famous. Besides, Chip was coming, and she might as well have her whole gang present.

"I know a rather interesting man named Garretson," she proposed. "May I phone him? He lives right near here."

"Who? Garretson, the jitney George Moore?"

Sure—go ahead.” If she had hoped to impress this moody artist, she hadn’t succeeded.

Brandt turned the key in the lock and with a flourish bade his guests enter. Swett and Verlyna, who had evidently expected something much more pretentious than this glorified paint-shop, sniffed perceptibly, and the Broadway star seated herself gingerly in the apartment’s best chair, which showed visible signs of requiring dusting and reupholstering.

But Pinkie was in her glory.

“Say, where does a rib doll herself up ’round these diggings?” she blithely demanded.

“Show her the way into my bedroom,” said Brandt, and Tess wondered if his intentions weren’t slightly malicious. She had only been in his box-like sleeping compartment once in her life, when he had asked her to view a rare painting, an original of Whistler’s that hung on the wall there.

Brandt’s nonchalant instructions had their effect upon Pinkie, for in the midst of her operations with lip-rouge and mascaro, she turned to Tess curiously and asked, “Are you and this art guy extra clubby?”

“Oh, we’re fairly friendly. I pose for him, and he’s giving me art-lessons.”

“Pose? Well, all I can say, dearie, is to repeat my pet gem of wisdom: always keep ’em guessin’,”

and always leave 'em wonderin' when you gurgle good night."

"Don't worry, Pinkie, he's been very nice to me, but I'm not nuts over him," retorted Tess. She wondered why she wished Jim could have been there to hear that declaration.

During Pinkie's elaborate ceremony upon the altar of beauty, Tess overheard two interruptions amid the babble in the next room and judged correctly that the first was the dancers from the floor below and second was Chip Thorndyke. She slipped out of the bedroom and into the little alcove where the telephone rested.

"Sunday is my working night," came Garretson's slow, world-weary voice to her. "But if that shindig is really as promising as you paint it, I'll chuck work and come over."

When, a few minutes later, Pinkie and Tess appeared in the studio, Brandt and Swett were escorting the cocktails around. It was raw stuff, and Tess's throat tingled as she tilted the slender glass.

"These lads mix 'em strong," pronounced Pinkie, but she absorbed the vitriolic mixture without wincing, and even accepted a re-fill.

"Introduce me to your little blonde friend," came the amused voice of Thorndyke at Tess's elbow.

And despite the nudge and quick, meaning glance from Pinkie, Tess told the truth.

“This is Pinkie Doran, Miss Thirty-Eight in Thorndyke’s De Luxe Shop.”

“Really?” Chip raised his narrow eyebrows. “We’re certainly picking them right at the store these days. How about a fox-trot, Pinkie?” And Tess was left looking at the slightly mocking glance in his circled eyes as he danced, closely locked, away with the ecstatic Pinkie to the strains of Brandt’s battered baby-grand being pounded lustily and expertly by Dale James.

But she did not have to stand long alone, for somebody outside was beating the old-fashioned knocker and, suspecting who he was, Tess fluttered over to the threshold and opened the door upon the narrow blinking face of Carl Garretson. Brandt, dancing by with Ann Patterson, loosed his hold upon her trim little back, to be introduced. “Artist, author, star dancer—Tess was quite proud to be one of this quartette. She was surely getting on.

“A nice, quiet little assemblage of youth, talent and alcohol, devoted to the worship of the arts,” commented Garretson, with a paternally familiar pat upon Tess’s back. She did not resent that pat because it so evidently annoyed Brandt. She wondered, indeed, if that was not the reason why, when



the dancing was renewed, she found Bob fox-trotting with her instead of Ann Patterson, who was doing the best she could with the clumsy-footed Garretson.

"I'm familiar with your stuff," Garretson remarked to Bob, after delivering Ann, bruised but laughing, into the charge of her sleek-haired, good-looking husband. "With the exception of that crazy one you had in the Independent Artists' show at the Astor, it's rather good."

"Thanks awfully," returned Brandt rather curtly. "Personally I thought my Astor exhibit was the best thing that I'd ever done in that particular *métier*."

"Oh, undoubtedly," contended the other. "But why not stick to a sane *métier*? After all, you know Gertrude Stein may be a genius, but who the devil knows it, since nobody can make sense of her stuff?"

And here followed a highly technical discussion, not assisted at all in its clarity by the bad alcohol which the two philosophers had just consumed. Tess listened, all ears. But she could glean no glimmer of sense from it.

"By the way," observed Garretson, coming out of the fog at last, "what are you doing with this little bundle of aspiring youth? I understand she's

the model for something new you're concocting on canvas."

Brandt described, rather petulantly, the four-panel series he was painting with Tess. It was obvious he did not fancy this lanky writer of best-sellers. Tess had discovered, before, Bob's intolerance of any one who ventured a flippant attitude toward his work, and he could not be expected to strike a sympathetic chord with Garretson, who held his own source of dollars so lightly.

"Well, don't exhaust all the material in her," drawled Garretson. "I want to use some parts of her in my next novel. I discovered her for the realm of art, you must admit."

"Are you really putting me into a novel?" asked Tess, with a tingle she could not altogether control.

"It's nothing but a title as yet."

"And what is the title?"

For the first time, it seemed to her, he looked at her seriously. "*Thin Ice*," he said shortly, and walked away.

She frowned and gazed after his narrow retreating back with the spindly shoulder-blades denting his tailor's handicraft. Was there any more significance in his answer than the fact that it was a good title with which to sell books? She caught her upper lip with her even white teeth and glanced

up inquiringly at the lean face of Brandt for an explanation.

“Don’t mind him,” snapped Bob. “He’s anemic, and somewhat of a bore besides. Let’s get another drink.”

The party gained momentum. Even Verlyna Charette was unbending and, sharing the piano-bench, chatting animatedly with Dale James. She consented to sing, later on, and delivered the hit of her current show in a mellow contralto. James had brought his famous mandolin along and as an encore accompanied Verlyna in several jazzified renditions of songs he had himself composed.

Then, with an intermission of another round of cocktails, Dale and Ann reproduced their bit from the *Follies* to the tune of *Bring Those Red Lips Back to Me*, the song all New York was whistling that fall, with Dale flashing his nimble white fingers over the ivory-inlaid instrument and Ann twinkling her masterpieces of feet and legs in the graceful abandon of a graceful, wild thing from the white sands of Waikiki. Flashing eyes, tumbling hair, all the mad exuberance of youth poured into the rippling staccato of the dance.

Tess, sitting between Brandt and Thorndyke on the divan and watching them, found it hard to keep her own feet still. Unconsciously her own

slim and supple body imitated the movements of the professional, until Bob and Chip, with a knowing smile over her head, sat watching her instead of Ann.

With the studio swept by the crashing unison of applause, Ann flung herself exhausted into a rickety Morris chair. From then on the party gained even more frantic speed. Pinkie, far giddier than normal under her tongue-loosening surplusage of cocktails, was probably the most hilarious person in the smoke-fogged studio. James applied himself to the piano again and tore off a "blues" that was all the rage in the Harlem dinge belt. The dancing became general, but somewhat more rowdy than before.

Chip, dancing with Tess, began pouring maudlin endearments into her ear and embracing her so earnestly that she finally drew away and protested a bit unsteadily, "Strangle-holds are barred, old dear."

"Is that so?" he belligerently retorted. But he obediently loosened his clasp. At the end of the dance, however, he put her in her place by saying, "Got to find another partner. You wouldn't be nice to me. Where's Pinkie? Whe-e-r-r-re's Pinkie? Oh, there you are, my, dear." He bowed low and ridiculously to Tess, nearly losing his balance, and

pursuing an uneven course across the floor, almost fell into the arms of the welcoming Pinkie.

Pinkie had by this time arrived at the stage where she wanted to break things. Out of the corner of her eye Tess, dancing with the sleepy-eyed Garretson now, glanced over at Brandt and observed the grim look of the artist, perhaps the soberest person in the room, as Pinkie, dancing by, with a shriek and a flourish swept the casket off the hemleted figure of the man in armor in the corner of the studio. Pinkie's gallant and somewhat intoxicated partner, Chip, stopped at once, bowed gravely to the armored figure and caught the casket, bobbing crazily around the floor, in his hand. Then, instead of replacing it, he set it upon his own head and, bowing to Pinkie, announced, "Sir Galahad, in person, positively, at your service, lady."

Pinkie considered this funny and rendered raucous homage to Chip's wit. They danced crazily on. But only for a minute, for, catching sight of Tess's *Ballet Dancer* costume flung carelessly over the top of the model's screen, Pinkie snatched it off in passing and draped it around her.

"Costume party!" she cried to the others. "Let's make it a costume party. I've got mine. I'm Madame Pay-lowa, the well-known ballyhoo dancer, and some kid, too!"

"Sir Galahad will say you are," agreed Chip, and handed her a resounding kiss.

The others took up the cry at once, and Brandt, to save his workshop from being pulled apart, hurried to his costume-trunk and, flinging its contents on the floor, shouted, "Plenty of stuff for everybody. Grab it. First come, first served."

"Come on," cried Tess excitedly to the slow-moving Garretson.

"At this point the party gets rough," he commented.

"Not rough—just inter-resting," she returned, disturbed to discover her tongue was doing funny things when she tried to pronounce words of more than two syllables.

"The two words are so often synonymous," explained Garretson.

They joined the hilarious, scrambling crowd upon the floor and out of the welter Tess drew a dusty French costume with high collar and train such as used to be associated with Sarah Bernhardt, though the flimsy material as boldly splashed with conventional red roses.

"Here's the prize of them all," she announced to Garretson, blowing her disheveled hair out of her eyes and fleeing with her treasure into Brandt's bedroom.

Deftly and swiftly Tess yanked her hair back smooth against her skull, donned the hastily-found costume, seized the plumed fan that went with it, and hurried out to rejoin the party.

“Good lord, what have we here?” laughed Garretson, who had wrapped Brandt’s flowered dressing-gown athwart his thin shoulder and looked like a somewhat emancipated cavalier of Charles II’s time.

“Name me and you can have me,” frivoled Tess.

Brandt, coming up to them in the gay velvet smock and tam-o’-shanter he had worn at the Fakirs’ Ball, heard her answer and ventured, “You look like my old friend, Princess Tchupwupska, cousin to the custodian of the late Czarina’s favorite blood-hounds.”

“My dear fellow,” Tess rippled. “How *did* you ever recognize me so far from home?”

“By the costume, dear lady. It is the one you wore at Peter the Great’s inaugural, is it not?”

“Good old Peter,” Tess murmured, “how *is* he getting on?”

“Let’s dance,” interrupted Brandt, dropping the nonsense. And they did. Past Pinkie, forced to seek haven against the whirligig within her head on the divan, but still laughing, while Chip bent over her in alcoholic solicitude. Past Luther Swett, looking more absurd than ever in a costume that

made him resemble the cover-design of a box of Turkish cigarettes, and Verlyna in the rôle of Fatima. Past Dale James, who had simply removed his coat and tucked his sport-shirt collar in, and past Ann, alluringly Spanish and incredibly small in a borrowed flowered mantilla.

And then Tess, laughing and exchanging shrill and rather thick-tongued banter with them all, was aware that Brandt was saying, "I wish you wouldn't get so friendly with Garretson and Thorndyke. They're wildcats with the women, you know."

"Old Man Gloom!" she chided, leaning on him a little for support. "Old Rain-maker!"

"Well, I mean it." His voice was tired and harsh.

"That's a funny thing," she chuckled. "Carl and Chip said the same about you, not half an hour ago."

Before he could carry the matter further, the sound of somebody vibrating the knocker on the studio-door came to them.

"My God, the cops," breathed Brandt, in simulated alarm. "Or some crab to kick about the noise. Be quiet, you people, a second."

He slid over to the door and gingerly opened it a crack. Holding colloquy with a male voice outside, he presently opened the door wide, and a



foreign-looking gentleman in evening clothes and sleek blond pompadour and a small pale mustache with fiercely waxed ends walked smilingly in. He had, the newcomer explained with a sudden rush of words to the lips and a strong accent, been passing to his own apartment across the hall, had been lured by the hilarity in his neighbor's lodging and had ventured to inflict himself upon them.

"Sure—certainly," Brandt broke in. "Don't apologize." And turning to Tess, he droned gravely, "Princess Tchupwupska, may I present my good friend and neighbor, Monsieur Arno Ricard?"

Mr. Ricard's small blue eyes twinkled and, entering at once into the spirit of the fun, he bowed, lifted her hand lightly with his and touched it to his lips. At the same time he shot her a glance out of his rather bold eyes that Tess, in her present state, did not get.

"Have I not met you somewhere before, Your Highness?" he asked.

"Maybe," she murmured, affecting an imitation of princessly hauteur.

"Budapest?"

"Come again!"

"Petrograd?"

"Wrong once more!"

"Where could it have been, then?"

"Coney Island, I guess," she answered pertly, and started to walk away.

"Perhaps it was last Friday at noon on Fifth Avenue. You lunched in Schrafft's, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Gosh, are you a mind-reader?" she inquired impertinently, surveying him cockily. She was not quite herself that night, and she knew it.

"No, but I have an eye for color and beauty. I need it in my business."

"Well, business now is to dance or drink. Come on." She wondered why her ears were ringing as she dragged him to the punchbowl.

There she managed to lose him in the crowd and the smoke, for somehow she instinctively felt safer with Brandt than with this polished continental, whom she could not see with perfect distinctness because her eyes persisted in watering and wavering.

"He owns Maison Ricard, the big fashionable modiste shop on Fifth Avenue," Brandt explained amid the din to Tess. "He lives across the hall and isn't such a bad scout, though you might call him the Anatole of Murray Hill, if you get what I mean. And he makes money enough from the plutocratic clientele he serves. Inspection of gowns only by appointment and all that sort of junk. He has the real Rolls-Royce trade of New York."

Tess noticed off and on during the next and last

half-hour of the party that the perfumed Ricard, with his funny spiked mustache, was regarding her a trifle too frequently and a trifle too intently for a chance acquaintance. When Brandt arose from the divan where they were sitting to bid good night to Dale James and Ann Patterson, Ricard came over and slipped down beside her.

“Say,” she began at once with bold and irritated vehemence, “what is there funny about me, aside from my costume?”

“Nothing, Princess, I assure you.”

“Then why are you looking at me all the time? I don’t altogether cotton to it.”

“I am wondering whether you would come to my office, say to-morrow noon, and talk over something I think may interest you.”

“Interest *me*? Gowns?”

“In a way.”

“Have you got something nifty for about four ninety-eight?” she mocked, marveling at her own loose-jointed gaiety.

“It’s something entirely different from that. Will you come?”

“I’ll think it over—if I remember it.”

And she arose, as Luther Swett ambled over, and accepted his offer to take her home in his limousine with himself and Verlyna.

Five minutes later she was bidding Bob and the others an unsteady good night and wondering why her eyes would hardly stay open.

"Monday at noon then," were Ricard's last words, delivered with a knowing look.

"Maybe—can't tell," she smiled up sleepily and a bit impudently from the stairs.

## CHAPTER XIV

“**A**FTER that swell party last night it’s sure sourin’ my disposition,” proclaimed Pinkie Doran wearily the next morning, “tryin’ to be a purfec’ lady to these lonjery hounds. It’s more like presidin’ over a cat-fight than a big-store counter. Yes, maddum, the goods is color fast. No wonder you kicked to Moysey about bein’ kept down here below the water-line. But don’t fall for that line o’ his about likin’ you so much he’s goin’ to keep you in his own little nest. He’s sore because you went over his head and made that holler to Chip Thorndyke. It ain’t done, dearie. And I miss my guess if it don’t anchor you in this subway of ours until the spring flowers is bloomin’ again.”

Tess put a hand to her trembling temples, scarcely hearing Pinkie as she rambled on.

“No, maddum, nothin’ on approval and no exchanges. We may be cellar-rats, Miss McGuire, but we’ve sure gotta live. I may lose tone when I park my lid in the locker every mornin’ but I can still step out at night. And say, birdie, how about comin’ over to the Hokey-Pokey dance at Durkin’s Hall to-

night? There'll be a bunch o' the up-stairs boys and some mean jazz breakin' loose."

Tess's eyes were thoughtful as she refolded a charmeuse petticoat. The paths of her aspiration did not lead toward Durkin's Hall and a crowd of rowdy store-clerks. She remembered that three men last week had sent her ridiculously large boxes of American Beauties and that the next day she was to dine with Carl Garretson at the Algonquin Round-Table. It seemed to count more, in some way, to go into places where the plush ropes were solemnly put down and your friend should call the head-waiter by his first name.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I've got to stay in and do some sewing to-night."

Pinkie nodded her approval.

"You're right, kid. A girl's gotta queen up, no matter what it costs. And it's some battle for an eighteen-a-weeker to rattle in like a three-year-old tin Lizzie in a coat o' pipe-enamel!"

If there was a barb in Pinkie's proclamation, Tess's head ached too severely to resent it. Chip<sup>a</sup> Thorndyke, she noticed, had not made his usual morning appearance in the basement. As noon neared, she decided that she had no appetite for lunch, and then there flashed upon her the memory

of Arno Ricard's invitation to call around and see him that day.

The Maison Ricard, she knew, was only five or six blocks up the avenue from Thorndyke's. On the whole, she decided, she would go. The walk in the crisp October air would do her good, and she would at least have the opportunity of seeing what was behind those exquisitely draped windows and dull bronze doors. Moreover, she was curious as to what he wanted. So she declined Pinkie's proposal to "jump over to Child's for a stack of wheats" and, donning her last year's autumn hat and coat, sallied forth upon the crowded sidewalk.

Tess no longer regarded the vista of motor-thronged Fifth Avenue with the look of fresh wonder that had been hers on that memorable morning when she stood down in front of the Waldorf and swept up the broad colorful expanse of Murray Hill with eager unspoiled eyes. She "belonged" now. Familiarity had bred not contempt, but indifference. And there was little opportunity for standing still and romancing amidst that scurrying tide of temporarily released shopgirls and white-collar men, of bargain-seeking dowagers in search of lunch at the hotels and the innumerable *table d'hôte* tearooms, of automat-bound office-boys and chattering matinée-

ing débutantes eddying about her and jostling against her.

In front of the Maison Ricard, the tall door-attendant in the chin-high pale blue uniform accepted doubtfully her announcement that she had an appointment with Monsieur Ricard and granted her grudging entrance. The small, softly carpeted passageway within led to a large, high-ceilinged oval room hung with dignified tapestries and devoid of every mark of a place where things were sold. Gracefully spindled chairs, upholstered in light blue, clustered about, but the gown-mart was apparently deserted. Tess wondered if all the inmates were out lunching at the Ritz. For an instant she had a panicky feeling that she was venturing beyond her depth and might have turned and departed had not signs of life in the shape of a courtly middle-aged matron, wearing a shiny silk gown and looking at least a duchess, appeared seemingly from nowhere and, advancing swimmingly upon her, inquired, "Mademoiselle wishes—?"

Tess announced again her engagement with Monsieur Ricard, and the duchess, departing and returning in a few minutes, admitted, as if it had been quite a blow to her, that Monsieur Ricard would see her at once. She was guided to an unobtrusive mahogany door and, when it was opened, discovered



herself within a luxuriantly large office with a broad flat-topped mahogany desk at one end, behind which the perfumed Frenchman now arose smilingly and waved her to a chair beside him.

"I was afraid you had not remembered our appointment," he began as they both sat down.

"Oh, I wasn't that far gone," she laughed, gaining courage by the second. She would have hated to admit to him the truth, that Bob's party marked the first time in her life she had quaffed enough liquor to feel a kick from it.

"Mr. Brandt tells me," he resumed, and his voice strangely lost most of its accent and became businesslike, "that you are a salesgirl in a department-store, but that you are looking for something better."

She nodded.

"When I saw you on the avenue last week, Miss McGuire," he went on, "I was struck by your beauty and poise, and I realized further in Brandt's studio last night that you were a girl of unusual talents, something of an actress and able to carry off a situation with dignity and *e'clat*. It occurred to me that I might have something here to offer a young lady like that."

She did not, she decided, fancy the hard, selfish and sensual look in the eyes of this immaculately attired male-modiste. But his words interested her.

“My establishment, as you probably know,” he lowered his voice, “caters to the most exclusive society trade. My patrons are ennuied rich ladies. In the principal modiste-shops of Paris to-day, as you may have heard, the latest sensation is being furnished by expatriated ladies of the Russian nobility who are working as mannequins for a living. So far none of them seems to have drifted here. But I am not unaware of the possibilities there would be, in an advertising way, if a Russian princess, for instance, should become attached to the Maison Ricard. My patrons are thrill-seekers. They would love it.”

“I number very few ladies of royal blood among my acquaintances,” Tess smiled.

“I know one,” he countered. “Princess Tchupwupska.”

“Oh—that.”

“Precisely. I think you took her off to perfection. I am sure, moreover, that you could deceive my not too shrewd patrons completely. Here is my proposition: Enter my employ, let me costume you for the rôle. I shall introduce you as a Russian princess, impoverished and forced to flee her country. You will simply be your own beautiful self, pour tea for my patrons from a samovar, and play your rôle. What do you say?”

Tess was confused by this unexpected and apparently ridiculous proposition. She stared at him, perplexed. But there was something alluring about it. It appealed to her actress-blood, to her desire to become a part of this wealthy, artistic world of soft fabrics and exclusive designs, to her craving for excitement with a little element of danger in it.

Calming herself, she asked, "But, after all, what is there in such an unusual position for me? Where would it take me?"

"Well," he shrugged. "Seventy-five dollars a week, for one thing. And Brandt tells me you are ambitious to succeed in art, that he is coaching you. I should be glad to add dress-designing and the study of the exclusive creations for which the Maison Ricard enjoys a reputation to your education."

Tess's beleaguered head was throbbing more painfully than ever. "If you give me a day or two to think it over," she faltered, though she was quite sure her answer was going to be in the affirmative.

"Assuredly," he replied, and stood up, signifying the end of the interview. She wished he had not placed his fat, over-manicured hand upon her shoulder. "Telephone me to-morrow or next day. Favorably, I trust, Princess." Was there a mocking light in those shrewd eyes?

He saw her to the outer door of the shop, and she walked back to Thorndyke's in a daze.

She was staying at home that night to transform by the sputtering gaslight the chinchilla of her old Marysville muff into dress-edgings. And Jim had promised to bring down a razor-blade and help her cut the best of the fur into strips.

But Jim, when he brought down his blade that evening, was not as companionable as Tess had hoped to find him. He sat with his morose and clouded eyes fixed on her face as she deftly plied her needle back and forth.

"You seem quiet, Jim," she said as she looked up from her work.

"I guess I'm not the one who's changed," was his slightly delayed retort.

"Then you think *I* am?" she asked, as she shook out her stock-model velvet frock and inspected the enriching chinchilla about its hem.

"You used to be interested in something besides clothes," he accused, his hostile eye on the divorcing black velvet she held up between them.

"But clothes seem to mean so much, in our world," she reminded him.

"Especially when you're out with the high-rollers," he amended.

"Is that an attack on my friends?" she asked.

“On the friends who may some time help you as well as me?”

“I don’t want their help,” flung back the other, “What I’d attack is their character. And some day you’ll wake up and find you can’t play with pitch without getting your fingers blackened.”

Her effort to remain patient was obvious.

“But I’m not playing with pitch, as you put it,” she quietly contended. “All I’m trying to do is to get something out of life, to get out of this awful hole and a store-basement.”

“You’re trying to get too much out of life,” was his resentful retort. “This town’s gone to your head and you’re hitching on to anything that will bring you a bigger dose of it.”

“Then what do you want me to do?” she asked with a dangerous coolness.

“I want to see you get down to earth again,” he said with a heat that did not appear reasonable.

“Well, unkindness will never bring me there,” she reminded him, studying his face with her narrowed eyes.

“Sometimes treating ’em rough is good for ’em,” he replied with the semblance of a smile, and there was such a heart-hungry look in his tired eyes that she almost relented and nearly drew his tousled head into her arms. But she was still riding high upon

the crest of the wave of excitement born in the Maison Ricard that noon, and she was not above harvesting a thrill from the shock she knew her news would give Jim.

“If you’ll be a real good boy, Jimsy,” she began with attempted gaiety and bestowing upon him the nickname that always made him frown, “I’ll spill a piece of real news to you.”

“If it isn’t about Brandt or Thorndyke or Garretson—shoot,” he grimly answered.

And she related the story of her proffered new job, from her first meeting with Ricard to the presentation of his proposal. When she had finished she asked triumphantly, “Now, what do you think of that for the late instructress of the Marysville kindergarten?”

“I think you’re a nut to try it,” he snapped harshly back at her. “And if that’s the best you can do you’d better try teaching again.” Then, seeing the angry storm-clouds gathering in her eyes, he added more gently: “Listen, Tess, you won’t get away with that. You’re bound to get caught and hit the earth with an awful wallop.”

“Jim, you’re not being just in this,” she contended. “Will you tell me what the successes in this town are founded on? As I begin to see it, they’re founded on bluff. It’s the best window-

dresser that gets by. Ten chances to one your boss is getting by on that very game. I know mine is. The mayor probably is. The lawyers and bankers and swells and business men certainly are. So, why shouldn't I do my little share of it?"

Jim studied her with clouded eyes.

"Because you're too damned honest to get away with it," he suddenly declared. Then he left his own chair and crossed to hers, slipping his arm around her as he pleaded: "Come on, Tess, why not drop all this foolishness and marry me now? Even if I don't get a nickel out of that carburetor, I'm making good enough money to keep us. What d' you say?"

She knew then that she loved him still, knew that the doubts she had had about her feelings for him lately were disappearing, knew that he wasn't a second-rater, as he sometimes seemed when she was with Brandt and the others. She took his hard grease-seared hand in hers and studied it thoughtfully. Then she lifted her head and said frankly. "No, Jim, I'm going to keep on trying. I wouldn't be satisfied with what you can give me—yet. I may be selfish, but it's better that I should tell you how I feel about it. It'll save us both a lot of pain." And she hastily changed the subject.

Yet she thought about what he had said to her

much more than she would have been willing to admit. She thought about it as she sat across the table from Carl Garretson at Leon's the next night and watched the listless-eyed novelist complain to the summoned *chef* that there was no Chablis in the bouillabaisse and that the bread ought to be *Pain Riche* in flutes. She even asked Garretson, after he wearily explained that he had finished up a novel that morning and felt like a mother who'd just given birth to a baby, if the modern girl couldn't meet men on their own ground and make it a give-and-take friendship without the old-fashioned complicating results.

"Why worry, Little Peterkin?" parried the sad-eyed Laodicean across the table from her. "Don't smash your goods to kill a rat."

"I don't quite understand that," objected Tess.

"Life is short, so why shadow it? We men, Apple-Blossom, only give good advice when we're too old to set a bad example. And my idea of heaven would be kissing you to the sound of trumpets."

"That doesn't answer my question," persisted the thoughtful-eyed girl, wondering why these older men merely nibbled at love about the same as girls nibbled at chocolates.

"It's a sign of mediocrity, my dear, to nurse set-



bled opinions on unsettled subjects," was Garretson's apathetic complaint. "And since our elixir of life so often turns out to be embalming fluid, let's see if these Hawaiian croquettes have fresh cocoanut in them."

"You may be a man of thought," asserted Tess. "But most of it seems to go below your belt-line."

Her companion laughed quite without enmity.

"Yet I've noticed that flappers with dreamy eyes don't necessarily have dreamy minds," he said as she declined his proffered cigarettes.

"You don't think I'm hard?" she objected.

"No, not hard," he retorted, "but unawakened. The forest is too thick yet for you to see the trees. But you're on your way through. And sellers in a brisk market don't stop to wash mud from their turnips."

"That may be clever," protested the other, "but it doesn't mean much to me."

"It will, later on," asserted the listless-eyed philosophizer who still refused to take her seriously. And she retaliated with a touch of the same flippant aloofness when he later held her hand in their taxi.

She was in a seventh heaven of delight, completely forgetting the tempest in her heart and head, as a little later in the evening she sat beside Garretson far down in the theater orchestra and watched

Jeanne Eagels enact the tempestuous role of "Sadie Thompson" in *Rain*.

"How wrought up and perspiring they all are over nothing," was Garretson's lazy comment upon the play at the end of the second act. "'Horne,' the derelict, who just sits and drinks and fans is the only sensible one of the lot."

"He *would* be—to you," she chided him, hardly hearing his remarks for her interest in the give-and-take conversation being carried on by a dark, keen-eyed little man with an inky pompadour and the stout fellow on the other side of him, whom Garretson had spotted for her as New York's wittiest and most vitriolic critic and the editor of one of the leading barber-shop humorous magazines.

"This is the seventh time they have seen the show together," commented Garretson. "They come so they can fight about it and disturb everybody."

Tess tried to listen to these two Olympians unobtrusively, but the roving eye of the critic detected her, and she noticed, to her secret satisfaction, that he found her not unpleasing and commented in a low voice to his companion, with a short backward nod at her. And in a moment the latter was thrusting his thick neck forward and striving with comically feigned naturalness to obtain a look at her. He too, she saw, nodded his head in approval, and she

was quite sure that if Garretson had not been too indolent to leave her for the smoke he had promised himself, they would have spoken to her.

Later Garretson taxied her to an exclusive supper-club just off Broadway, where they sat and sipped surreptitious cocktails amid an atmosphere of gray-haired "sugar daddies" and their young ladies, futuristically daubed walls, jazz expertly dispensed, scantily-clad cabaret artistes and incredibly expensive viands. Here, again, many a sophisticated male glance of admiration was directed her way. And the girl was not as oblivious to them as she pretended.

But so brazen were some of these glances that even Garretson said, at last, not without a note of annoyance: "Too bad all the pirates didn't perish with the Spanish Main. And I'm not crazy about this 'parader' rôle, at least not with a pin-feather beauty with the bloom still on. You've got them guessing. And the life of an Adirondack doe during the hunting-season is a flowery bed of ease compared with that of an attractive girl in these anti-Volstead dens."

Tess wondered why this shaggy novelist should always remain so half-hearted in his ardencies, so casually flippant in his admirations.

But by the time she reached home again, Jim's

warning had been quite obliterated by the attractions of this suave world in which she had been living during the past nine hours. Dashing in at the last moment for breakfast the next morning, after he had long since departed, and with only the cheap garrulous vaudevillian, Walters, as a table-mate, she flew to the Subway and, punching in at Thorndyke's twenty minutes late, seized the first opportunity to steal out to the employees' telephone booth and tell Ricard that she would take the job.

"Good," he answered. "Come up as soon as possible and I shall personally outfit you with gowns. You can start in Monday morning with me, if you please."

## CHAPTER XV

**A**SIDE from a number of annoying little complications, Tess regarded the beginning of her career at the Maison Ricard as the most important step she had yet taken toward the uncertain pinnacle for which she had been striving since coming to New York.

Her duties were neither exacting nor strenuous. Always a good actress, a born mimic, and possessing a reserve of that vague asset which New York termed "brass," she was not very much afraid of being detected in the rôle which her position called upon her to fill. If she had any scruples about the falsity of her rôle, the excitement of it and the opportunity it offered of making good money away from Thorndyke's stifling basement, of basking in the cool opulence of Ricard's customers almost on an equal footing with them and of wearing the exclusive gowns which he furnished her free of charge, quieted her conscience. She would simply perform her duties, with a wary eye to leeward, to be sure, and in time seize one of the numerous opportunities for something better, that, she felt, would come

her way in this chance-rich world in which she was now ensconced.

Though Ricard, being primarily a business man, had been very conservative about mentioning it, she was quite sure, after a fortnight in her new job, that she was a success. The number of fashionably-clad ladies who alighted from their expensive cars and sniffingly inspected the mannequins at the Maison Ricard seemed to her to have been augmented since her arrival, and Madame Aug, the tightly-laced forelady who had guided her to Ricard's office on the noon of their first interview, confirmed this.

The madame, whom Tess shrewdly labeled as more German-Jewish than French, told her in the dressing-room, which she shared with the models, at the end of two weeks, "Ricard is no fool. He didn't hire you for love. Have you seen to-day's paper?"

Madame Aug produced the voluminous sheet from the closet in which her belongings hung. It was folded in to a center page where she pointed out a pencil-circled story with her overly pink fingernail. It read:

RUSSIAN COUNTESS POURING  
TEA IN FIFTH AVENUE SHOP  
Madam Patovska, former member of the  
Russian nobility, lending eclat to Maison  
Ricard. . . .

“Ricard planted that,” declared Madame Aug, emerging from her rôle in the excitement. “Anybody who thinks Americans have a monopoly on getting stuff into the papers and fooling the boobs is only kidding himself.”

Beneath her polished veneer, Madame Aug, Tess had already discovered, occasionally resembled Pinkie Doran in language if not in appearance, and indeed the whole Maison Ricard personnel, when customers were not there to see and hear, seemed not unlike Thorndyke’s.

As the weeks went by, Tess settled into a comfortable routine of pouring tea by day from her polished samovar at the edge of the richly-carpeted salon, where the mannequins paraded for the enlightenment of critical wives of millionaires, and by night penetrating even more deeply into the butterfly-life that flourished after the artificial heaven of electricity was lighted along the Gay White Way. And time had already registered its changes with her. Heavy make-up darkening her eyes and scarletting her lips under the fluffy light-purple turban, a tight-fitting shimmering gown lending a new dignity to her slim body from throat to toes, she was far different, as she gracefully proffered a tiny glass of exotically Russian design to an obviously thrilled banker’s wife, from the Tess who had so gratefully

welcomed Jim's protecting arms, on disembarking at the Grand Central Station and hearing the first roar of the city in her ears.

Upon her forays into Broadway's night-life, she wore other and more conservative gowns, borrowed from Ricard at his request, though retaining much of her facial make-up. Indeed Mrs. Binner, more nosy than motherly, had looked askance several times at the bundles which Tess brought home marked with the crest of the fashionable modiste, and Walters, meeting the girl in the hallway one evening, as, burdened with a new-parceled gown and hat, she hurried up the stairway, exchanged knowing glances with the landlady. He had never quite got over Tess's innocent dinner-table account of the Lou Hertz "Who the hell is Walters?" incident.

In the busy whirl that life had become for her, Tess was worried at times that the two things which she seemed to be most neglecting were the very two things, which, her contemplative moments disturbingly assured her, were most worth while—Jim and the card-painting work she was doing in Brandt's studio. Ricard's offers to teach her gown-designing had thus far not made themselves evident, and she had not pressed him, knowing from her more intimate contact with his high-powered and generously





*A Paramount Picture.*

AS A RUSSIAN COUNTESS, TESS GAVE THE PATRONS A THRILL.

*Manhandled.*



paid activities that stopping to instruct an amateur in his trade would entail a real sacrifice of time, money, and tranquillity on his part, if not on hers.

Brandt had completed his four panels for the Art Theater, as far as her posing was concerned. As he had predicted, he still found no use for her in working out his fourth panel of *Tragedy*.

"You're riding the crest now, Tess," he told her seriously, "and you look anything but the soul of tragedy."

"But I can imitate tragedy, Bob," she laughed. "Look." And she distorted her sensitive features into a simulation of abject woebegoneness that made him smile in spite of himself. In her presence, she had noticed to her discomfiture, Brandt seemed always to be holding himself under leash. She secretly objected to this, and to its implications. On the few occasions lately when she had let herself into his studio to do her own neglected work, it seemed to her he had made a distinct point each time to be entirely absent or to find some excuse for leaving immediately after her arrival.

"No, Tess," he finally said, "in this series I must have sincerity or nothing. I couldn't even use you for *Comedy* now."

"Why not?"

"Well, I caught the first fresh, innocent unspoiled-

ness of you when you posed for that. And it isn't there any more." He checked himself abruptly, wondering if he had said too much.

"Do you think I've gone backward?" she asked, disturbed that the artistic Brandt and the mechanical Jim should have said almost the same thing about her.

"Backward? No. You've got city common sense and the protective hardness that I dare say is necessary for a girl in this town."

He was standing very close to her, and she was struck by the narrowed and hungry look in his eyes as they swept her. "Necessary everywhere you go among men—even here," he added, and, with a short unintelligible exclamation of scorn at his own weakness, snatched up his hat and fairly hurled himself out of the door.

Jim Hogan was working very hard that fall and winter—too hard, Tess kept assuring him, with an anxious look at his darkly circled eyes and the obvious shrinkage of flesh from his still broad shoulders and chest.

"Why do you go back to the garage at night after you've put in your full time during the day?" she asked him on one of her few free evenings in early December as they sat down together in Mrs. Binner's former parlor after dinner.

“I work for myself nights. For instance, I’m packing up my carburetor to-night. The Detroit people wrote me saying they’d take a look at it, and I’m sending it to them,” he moodily explained. And then, never able to get it out of his mind how she was drifting away from him, he added, “But what about yourself? You work hard all day at that crazy job of yours, and then go out all night. You don’t look so healthy yourself.”

She flushed and then laughed. “Oh, I feel all right. Besides, my parties aren’t work. They’re recreation. Carl and Chip and Bob and the rest are stimulating.”

“And I’m not.”

“You’re different, Jim,” she said with a wistful tenderness that he stubbornly tried not to see. “You’re my good old balance-wheel. If it weren’t for you, I’d probably have long since gone flying off into space and smashed.”

“Well, suppose some day the old balance-wheel gets tired and just naturally lies down on the job? What then?”

She fidgeted nervously. She had never known she possessed nerves until lately. She grasped his coat and laughed. “Why doesn’t the old balance-wheel get some new life into him then by taking me out to the movies or somewhere, right now? We

haven't been anywhere together in an awful while, Jim."

"That hasn't been my fault, entirely," he was justified in replying. "You're never home, and I'm working nights, and I can't afford to take you where you want to go."

"To-night I want to go to the movies, and I'll blow, if you like."

"No, thanks. I'm packing up my carburetor to-night."

"I'll come down to the garage with you then and keep you company. Maybe I can help," she offered, determined to placate him.

His face brightened.

"All right," he cried. "Maybe you can chase the jinx away from the darned thing and bring me some good luck for a change." She wished, then, that she had kept better posted about this invention of his. Somehow it had seemed such a futile thing for Jim, her good old hard-working Jim, to be putting so much terribly hard labor and time into that cold and aggravating little piece of machinery, as it seemed to her when he had showed it to her two months ago, and expecting it to make his fortune—and hers. She felt a vague resentment toward it, not only because it had caused her to spend two very boring nights with him at the New York Automobile

Show, where he had stood for hours gazing wraptly into the interiors of immodestly undraped cars and she had tried desperately to register an interest she didn't feel in the least, but because it was taking him away from her, rasping his formerly placid temperament into nervous tenter-hooks and possibly undermining his health. Once the carburetor was off his mind, she had frequently told herself, he would be able to give her the attention she craved, be his old dear self and make a place for himself in her life. If she was selfish in her outlook, she was not for the present willing to see it that way.

As she hurried up-stairs for her hat and cloak to go out with him, she felt very virtuous in the thought that she was about to sacrifice a whole evening for Jim. Especially when she heard him whistling cheerfully as he climbed the additional flight of stairs to his own room to prepare for the wintry air outside.

But before she had taken her second-best coat from its hook, the telephone shrilled down in the hall below, and the voice of Walters sounded loudly up to her.

“Call for you, Miss McGuire.”

She dropped her coat and hurried down. It was Chip Thorndyke, and he wanted her to try out his new car with him.

"We'll run over to Westbury, get something hot to eat and dash right back," he promised.

"I can't to-night, Chip. I have a date."

Jim was half-way down to her, and she did not see him in time to check the regretful ring in her voice. She clapped her hand over the transmitter and explained to Jim who it was. She couldn't help it; the prospect of a brisk ride on that moonlit night in the kind of car Chip drove and the way he drove it was not without its appeal.

"Oh, don't mind me. Go ahead," Jim said, none too convincingly. Then, with the stubbornness of a martyr: "You can't help me any. You'd only be in the way."

"You're sure you won't mind?" she appealed, half-hoping he would seize the phone, snap the receiver up and force her to go along with him. He nodded in the negative, and, without a look back at her, opened the street-door and disappeared.

Tess returned to the telephone and Chip.

"Maybe I can make it at that," she said defiantly. "But I've told you I wouldn't ride alone with you any more. You'll have to get somebody else to go along with us."

"Afraid of me?" came his mocking voice over the wire to her.

"No. But I prefer men who can read a no-tres-



passing sign. Forgetting sometimes spoils the fun."

"All right, iceberg, you win. I'll have a chaperon with me. Ten minutes from now?"

"O. K.!" she said with her habitual little cry of approval.

And she sped up-stairs and changed her clothes.

When Chip arrived in a low, tightly-curtained runabout and an enormous fur coat, she saw that the essential third person had taken the form of a tired-looking music-critic named Gilliard, who smoked incensive Turkish cigarettes and exhaled an odor of gin. She felt that Thorndyke had met her terms in a somewhat qualified manner. But she enjoyed the ride out into the country and she enjoyed the color and movement of the unexpectedly pretentious inn, where she found a table reserved for them. She declined to participate in the synthetized cocktails which Gilliard poured from a voluminous silver pocket-flask and danced with him once and once only, when he held her unnecessarily close to his attenuated body and breathed alcoholic endearments into her ear.

She was relieved, in fact, when he withdrew from the scene. She found something reassuring in Chip Thorndyke's unnaturally thoughtful sobriety, in the ease and discretion with which he danced, in the courtly if slightly mocking respect with which he

treated her. He was equally quiet and self-absorbed when he suggested, after she had complained that the music was beginning to make her head ache, that they run on to Spring Harbor for supper.

He did not argue with her, when she objected that it was too late for that, but climbed into the seat beside her and tucked her up in a motor-rug. A vague sense of escape took possession of her as they sped cityward through the starlit night, threading their way through light-spangled towns and stretches of snow-white open country given over to shadows and silence. It was not until he stopped in a gusty side-road and turned off both his engine and his lights that she realized the flimsy foundation on which her feeling of security had rested.

“Can’t you be kind to me, dearest?” he said with a deeper note of feeling in his voice.

“I don’t quite understand what I’m to be kind about,” she retorted in a singularly quiet voice, curious in spite of herself.

“You know it’s you I want—all of you,” he protested, with his arm tightening about her.

“But what are you offering me?” she demanded, with the point of her elbow, like a spear-head, holding him off.

“Everything,” he cried, “everything to make life happier and lovelier for you. You’re not made for

sordid things and I want to protect you from them.”

“Does that mean you’re asking to marry me?”

“I’m not free to do that,” he said, after a moment of silence.

“Then when you speak of protecting me you really mean keeping me?” she rather wearily inquired. “It must be that, remembering you’re already a married man.”

“But I want you more than anything else in this world,” he persisted, his arms still clasped about her. The barricading elbow, however, still stood between them.

“What would you do with me?” she asked in a flattered voice that took the final tension out of his arms.

“I’d see that you had everything a woman could want.”

She shook her head from side to side, “But the one thing a woman wants wouldn’t be there.”

“I could be very good to you,” he said, with unlooked for humility.

“But your being good to me, as you express it, implies an ugly situation. And I hate ugliness.” She writhed away from him and sat stiff in the leather-padded seat. “Let’s be going.”

“I don’t intend to give you up,” he said with a quiet moroseness as they swung back into the main-

traveled road. And she wondered why she had not the heart to be angrier with him.

"I don't want you to," she agreed as they headed homeward. "I'd like to feel that we could be friends, that we could ride this way together under the stars without being afraid of each other."

"Men aren't made that way," he gloomily proclaimed. "And when I see that rose-bud pout of your lips, I want to kiss them."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because they're so provocative."

"But there can't be much kick in it, if they don't kiss back," she protested, unwilling to see him recede too hopelessly into the background.

"I intend to make them, before I get through with you," was his genially ominous threat.

## CHAPTER XVI

IT was one day during the week following that Tess, hurrying to a belated lunch in the doubtful sunshine of a Fifth Avenue winter afternoon, plunged almost headlong into a large man in a heavy ulster, who had suddenly popped out of the mausoleum-like bank-building she was passing. She met and caromed off his shoulder as he went with head down against the wind, making for his automobile at the curb.

Tess looked up quickly and found herself gazing into the face of Todd Harlan—Todd with an unaccustomed mustache and slightly mottled complexion and scandalously heavy lines about the jowls and waist. But unmistakably it was Todd.

“Skipper!” he almost shouted. “That’s certainly twisting the long arm of coincidence out of her socket. I heard you were in town when my uncle was in New York Thanksgiving time. I’d have looked you up if I’d known where to look.”

“And I you,” she found the courage to protest.

“You could get me in the phone book,” he chided. “But that’s neither here nor there. And we can’t stand jabbering or we’ll both freeze to death. How

about giving me an hour, if you've nothing better? Had your lunch?"

She hadn't, she admitted.

"Well, lunch first. Then we'll go to a *matinée* and have tea and dance at the Plaza later, and you can tell me the story of your young life."

"I can't, Todd. I'm a working girl. I have to be back on the job in an hour."

"That so? At least you can have lunch with me?"

When he had tucked her into the seat beside him and was swinging around the corner toward the Biltmore, he shot another appraising glance at her and remarked admiringly, "You're certainly looking like a million dollars. [This job of yours must be a hummer."

She told him just enough about it to pique his curiosity.

"My wife buys her duds at Ricard's," he commented. "Boy, they know how to soak you, too." She wondered if she were mistaken in thinking his forehead furrowed a bit as he spoke of his wife. He made her uneasy, somehow. It was like going to lunch with Samson after his locks had been sheared or a Napoleon escaped from Elbe. Why couldn't a handsome stalwart fellow like Todd take care of himself after entering the business-world? She had met so many of them—baggy-eyed,

paunchy, middle-aged men who were introduced to her as former college crew heroes and football giants, men who contented themselves with fiddling at golf over the spring and summer week-ends and otherwise allowed their neglected abused bodies to slide upon the shoot that leads eventually to apoplexy or ataxia. It was a shame. It was, somehow, an offense against God.

“Family?” he laughed, a little bitterly, she thought, while they were waiting for luncheon. “I haven’t any. My wife’s in France—been there since October.” He seemed anxious to change the subject. “But say, you look different than you used to, Skipper. More class, prettier than ever. You’re citified, too. I tell you, it gets us all, doesn’t it? You look just like the girls my wife bats around with. You’re younger, of course, but you’re getting there.”

She asked him, not without coquetry, if he did not fancy her as she was now.

“Oh, sure,” he hastened to flatter her. “I’ve always liked you, Skipper, ever since you were a kid. Remember the old diving-board? In those days I was going to be a professional swimmer and travel around the world like Duke Kahanomoku or some chap like that. And you and I were going into vaudeville together, weren’t we? I dare say every-

body gets nut ideas like that. And here I am junior partner in a brokerage house and director of a dozen or so companies that I don't know a damned thing about, and care less." He did not say it boastingly. He said it as if it didn't make him particularly happy. "I was just coming out of a directors' meeting when I bumped into you. So that was one meeting I'll never regret attending."

"Are you trying to flirt with me, Todd?" she asked, with raised eyebrows.

"Everybody does, don't they?" he smiled and, dipping his fingers into the lukewarm finger-bowl, dried them and lighted a very black cigar. "New York's a tough town on a pretty girl."

"Why do you say that?" she came back combatively. "New York's what you make out of it. I don't understand you gloomy men knocking it all the time. This town has been very good to me."

"It's treacherous though, Skipper. It'll turn on you some day. The thing to do is to take your pile and beat it a second before that happens. That's what my Uncle John did. He was only forty-five, right in the prime of his business life, when he retired and bought that place in Marysville. Wall Street thought he was crazy—and still does. We were talking seriously about that very thing when he and Aunt Constance were in on Thanksgiving. He



told me then how at forty-five he was right up to his neck in New York, hitting a terrific nervous pace in Wall Street all day and burning up more energy running a big town-house and dashing around to parties practically every night during the season. Aunt Constance and he had hardly a minute to themselves or to each other from October to May. Pretty soon he wasn't feeling right and his doctor was shaking his head over him—high blood pressure and all that.”

Tess tried to be interested, but it seemed a recountal of far-off history.

“Well, Uncle John has always had astounding sense. ‘Here’s where we quit, then,’ he said to Aunt Constance. And, miracle of miracles, she agreed. He withdrew from practically all his companies, handed over his share of his brokerage business, except for a small interest, to his partners, and then and there rusticated. It’s funny, but he hasn’t rusted out, as some of these wise ones claim a tremendously active man does if he gives up business. He simply substituted healthy interests for unhealthy ones. He yachts, fishes, golfs, raises fruits and vegetables and chickens, and has a whale of a time.” Todd reached over and reclaimed some of the change from the waiter’s silently proffered little silver platter, leaned back and sighed. “Well, that’s

the dope, Skipper, get out one jump ahead of the earthquake.”

“Having listened to your sermon, Todd,” she laughed, “I’ll now have to burn up a thousand or so foot-pounds of extra energy tearing back to work, so I won’t be fired.”

“I’ll drop you wherever you say,” he offered, rising and beating the waiter to helping her with her cloak.

“This sort of thing ought to happen often, now that we’ve rediscovered each other,” he urged as he assisted her to alight in front of the Maison Ricard. “How about a show to-morrow night?”

“I’m booked,” she said. But she agreed to dinner and the theater for a night, one week away.

To that meeting, however, she looked forward with doubtful pleasure. Todd depressed her. She sensed underneath his attempted cheerful matter-of-factness and genuine pleasure in seeing her again a vague unhappiness. New York, despite the fact that it had evidently made him rich, had not made him contented. Tess wondered what Mrs. Todd could be like, this indifferent lady who had been yachting when Todd arrived that time at New London for the week-end and who had now deserted him to journey abroad.

But thoughts of Todd were banished temporarily

from her head when, on the following evening, while Mrs. Binner's household were clattering and chattering at dinner, the slovenly maid leaned over Tess and whispered stridently, "There's a party out in the parlor askin' for you, Miss McGuire." Tess abandoned her unappetizing wedge of mince pie to ascertain the cause of the message and from the parlor-doorway saw a young man and woman sitting on Mrs. Binner's overworked divan. She did not at first recognize them. But when she came closer, Tess uttered a joyous little exclamation, followed by, "Why, Claire!" and an exuberant kiss of welcome.

Then she held her former roommate and plied her with eager questions without giving the equally excited Claire a chance to answer them until the latter had fairly to turn her bodily around to face the grinning third person in the room, whom Tess had been inhospitably neglecting.

"You know Fred, don't you, Tess?" Claire asked, a little catch of pride in her voice.

Tess faced Claire's husband and shook hands with him. Even in the midst of her enthusiasm at seeing their familiar faces, Tess realized that both Claire and Fred had changed, and the change was for the better. They were well-dressed, healthy-looking and with a certain contented poise about

them that she felt at once. Fred had lost his sullen, hang-dog expression, was bigger and evidently very much a man.

“Fred’s folks are in Florida for the winter, and we’re making a flying trip to join them for a few weeks,” Claire explained. “We’ve been working pretty hard running the farm, and they thought the change would do us good. We’re taking the boat to-morrow. When I found we were going to be in New York over-night, I wrote to your aunt and got your address. I thought we would surprise you.”

“You succeeded,” Tess admitted.

Jim had entered the room in the vanguard of the other boarders, and Tess introduced him to her friends. Fred and he were soon smoking and deep in conversation, leaving the girls to continue their animated chat.

Finally, the two tête-à-têtes lulling somewhat, Tess suggested, “Let’s all four celebrate by going to a show.”

Fred and Jim seemed to be hitting it off very well, she noticed, and she was relieved to see the tired harassed look had already begun to disappear from Jim’s face.

They roared down to the Grand Central Station in a subway express, alighting to walk up Forty-second Street, the men ahead and the girls arm-in-

arm behind them, through the flood of Fifth Avenue motors dammed temporarily by the traffic policeman's sturdy arm, and on into the seething maelstrom of Broadway's evening pleasure-seekers.

"You can get good theater-seats this time of year in Grey's," Tess said confidentially to Jim, mentioning the name of New York's chief cut-rate ticket-office, and thinking to ease some of the strain on his pocketbook.

Jim seemed to be enjoying this impromptu adventure. He was vastly pleased, if a little surprised at Tess's unaffected pleasure in the company of this plain, wholesome young country couple. It seemed to prove as nothing else could have, that she was after all still unaffected and sound at heart. So, waving her economical suggestion aside, he plunged into Tyson's and returned with four tickets for the *Follies* orchestra.

Suddenly, as they crossed Broadway, Tess gasped and said, "I'm frightfully stupid, Claire. I never asked you and Fred if you had had your dinners."

"Yes. We're stopping at the Commodore and ate before we looked you up," Fred answered, simply enough. And Jim was very glad that he had not bought tickets in Grey's.

Dale James and Ann Patterson closed the first part of the show with their dancing-act, and Tess

whispered to Claire that she knew them. During the intermission, while the boys adjourned for a smoke, Tess described, under Claire's prompting, more about the party at Brandt's studio where she had met the *Follies* favorites.

"You must be having a wonderful time here, Tess," Claire commented.

And thus encouraged, Tess related more about her adventures among the white lights, though somehow they did not gain the response from Claire that Tess rather expected they would.

"It must be lots of fun," declared Claire, "but I don't think I'd be crazy about living here." This from the romantic, scatter-brained Claire!

"But don't you find it awfully dull on a fruit-farm?" asked Tess, rather set down. "I should die."

"I love it," Claire countered stoutly. "Of course everybody admits there's no place like the country eight months of the year, and the other four aren't bad. We run into town for the movies or to New London if we want to see a real show. A number of them open there, you know. And we have a wonderful radio set. We've had San Francisco and Atlanta and everything in between. We may be rubes, Tess, but we hear the same orchestras you're probably dancing to, night after night."

“But isn’t the work fearfully hard?”

“Yes, we work. Fred is running the farm almost altogether now. His father has practically retired, and in a year or two the place will be entirely ours. We’ve had a wonderful year. Father Blake has promised that if we do as well next year, we can go to Florida next winter and he’ll stay up and look after things. You should see my house, Tess. I’ve every improvement you’d find in any city home—hot-water, heat, electric-lights, iron-and-washing-machine, vacuum-cleaner and everything. I belong to two clubs in the village, and we have bridge, mah jongg and dancing-parties regularly. I don’t think the country is so bad.”

“It doesn’t sound so,” Tess agreed. She was getting a new light upon the rural life she had so thoroughly scorned. Certainly Fred and Claire looked healthy and happy enough.

“Have you been to Marysville lately?” Claire interrupted Tess’s thoughts. “From your aunt’s letter I got the idea that she was sort of lonesome. She didn’t say so, but I read it between the lines.”

Tess flushed. There was no reason for the guilty pang that shot through her, she argued to herself. She had written to Aunt Kit regularly, and the dear old soul hadn’t hinted to her of being lonesome.

“I’m thinking of running up and seeing her over

Christmas," Tess answered. She didn't tell Claire, however, that it was the first time she had definitely contemplated such a thing. But now that she had committed herself, she on the spur of the moment decided that she *would* visit Marysville at Christmas time, little more than two weeks off. They would be tremendously busy at the shop, but Arno Ricard had been more than kind to her. She was sure she could get an extra day or two off.

"I told Fred about my carburetor," Jim said happily to her when the boys had resumed their seats for the second act. "He's all worked up over it!"

"Yes," Fred leaned over and added, taking it for granted Tess was as deeply interested in the fateful piece of machinery as was Jim, "it sounds all right to me, and if it'll do what Jim thinks it will, seems as if those Detroit people ought to grab it quick."

"Fred knows a lot about automobiles," Claire assured Jim with pardonable pride.

"Yes, I know he does," put in Tess mischievously, and looked so knowingly at Fred that, remembering, he blushed a little. And Claire laughed outright.

"That was the time you told me Fred was a fathead," she brazenly announced; and it was Tess's turn to redden.

"Well, I'm sure he isn't a fathead now," Tess



recovered. "I think he's a very clever man to have grabbed you when he could, Claire, and to make the success of himself and his farm that you've been telling me about."

Thus she strove to smooth things over before the curtain rose and the *Follies* commenced to dazzle them anew.

When they left the Blakes at the Commodore after the show and descended to the Subway, Jim turned to Tess and said approvingly, "I like them. They're real. You don't meet many of that kind in this town."

Tess wondered if one did. She lay awake, contemplatively awake, for a long time that night. The manner in which Claire had calmly listened to her account of her parties and clothes and the celebrities she had associated with and then remarked with such quiet conviction, "But I don't think I would be crazy to live here," had made a much deeper impression than Tess would admit. The present Claire was no fool. And there was about her and Fred, as Jim had said, something real and substantial and deeply rooted that was not apparent in Chip Thorn-dyke or Bob Brandt or Carl Garretson or even in Todd Harlan. It was the same quality that existed in Jim, that made her feel that if she lost Jim she would in some way be hopelessly adrift.

The next morning she told Jim that she was going to Marysville for Christmas, and invited him to come along.

"I'm glad you're going, Tess," was his reply. "And I'd certainly go along if I could. But I'm expecting to hear from Detroit any day now. And if their answer is O. K. they'll probably ask me to jump out there right away. They'll want to hold tests and ask questions, and it's better for me to be on the ground. It's now or never with me, you know. If there's a chance to put this over, I'm going to chuck up my job and beat it out there and battle for myself. My best plan is to stick here in New York until I hear one way or the other."

She was forced to agree with him. He saw her off at the Grand Central the day before Christmas, and six hours later she was greeting Katherine McNair up on the wind-swept station platform at Marysville.

Though her aunt was outwardly as unperturbed as ever, Tess could tell from the trembling of the elderly lady's fingers as she held the half-frozen hands of her niece that her welcome was going to be even warmer than she could have hoped for.

"I've been terribly selfish," declared Tess, after she had hugged and kissed her aunt until her young body, chilled from her long ride in a dirty car in

which the heating system seemed to have broken down, was almost warm again. "I should have run up and seen you sooner. But I've been so rushed and you said in all your letters that you were getting on so well without me."

"I've missed you," Miss McNair said, quite simply. But her laconic words spoke volumes.

Main Street was packed hard with ice and snow, and the motor bus in which they were riding lurched crazily in the one crooked rut that formed the only navigable channel. Cold blasts from the sound whistled through the barren trees, and the two women huddled close to each other and stamped their feet. Heavy storm-doors at the entrances to all the houses made them look even uglier than ever. The few people who were on the streets were muffled to the eyes in wool and heavily booted in arctics. Tess thought of Claire and wondered grimly if young Mrs. Blake was really serious in her preference for the country in the winter-time.

"I'm sorry, Miss McNair, but I'm scairt to push on any further. Drifts are too deep," came the hoarse voice of the fur-capped driver.

And Katherine McNair answered, "All right, Pete, we'll get out here."

They were at the point where the traveled road joined the private lane leading to the McNair and

Harlan houses, and Tess and her aunt were forced to wallow fifty yards through unpathed heavy snow, to the porch of the house. Tess stood an instant looking out toward the leaden waters of the sound as her aunt fumbled with the door. It was a dreary prospect. The gate at the entrance to the Harlan grounds was barricaded, and heavy storm-coverings guarded the windows. The place was deserted. Mr. and Mrs. Harlan were in Florida, Miss McNair later explained, and indeed it seemed from the further bits of gossip she retailed that everybody in Marysville who could afford it had sought a warmer clime. Tess nursed no suspicion that if her aunt could have been by some chance repaid the money which she had taken from her inheritance for her niece's upbringing, she too would not have been spending the winter in this snow-covered wilderness. It is the privilege of youth to think little of the past.

Inside the house it was fairly warm and cheerful. But as Sarah, her aunt's faithful maid, explained to Tess out in the kitchen the next morning, every house should have a man in it in the winter-time. Lugging heavy buckets of coal around and tending a furnace was fatiguing work for two women like Miss McNair and Sarah. And neither of them was as young as they once were.

Sleeping in her familiar old bedroom overlooking the sound was a pleasant enough sensation to Tess, though she had to get up in the night and augment her three blankets with her fur coat, to keep out the nipping wind. In the morning she donned a pair of arctics which she discovered in the closet of her old room and walked down to the village and made several calls. This was not an adventure of unalloyed joy. People seemed altogether too anxious to know more about her affairs than she cared to tell them, and she caught them looking rather suspiciously at her Fifth Avenue clothes and her long muskrat coat.

"I understand you see a lot of Todd Harlan," sharp-faced Miss Treadway, the post-mistress, remarked, with a pointed look over her nose-glasses. And Tess glanced so quickly and so penetratingly at the assiduous spinster that the latter lowered her eyes and faded silently behind her barricade of lock-boxes.

Tess returned from the village mysteriously out of sorts, and it took her Aunt Kit's prodigally elaborated Christmas dinner to restore the girl to a good humor. After dinner she thoroughly enjoyed a long talk with her aunt as they sat, shawls over their shoulders, rocking in front of the crackling open fire, a needed auxiliary to the undersized furnace.

Tess described, with certain calculated deletions, those details of her life in New York which she had not already related through the mail to her aunt, with Miss McNair interspersing the monologue with appropriate comments. When she had concluded, Tess leaned back, sighed and asked, "Do you think I've changed very much, Aunt Kit?"

Miss McNair said, frankly enough: "Yes. You left me a girl, and you've come back a woman."

"Are you sorry?" Tess asked tenderly and curiously.

"Mothers and foster-mothers always are, aren't they? But the thing happens just the same. You've come through unspoiled and unsoiled, I can be almost sure of that. It's about as I said—you're capable of taking care of yourself."

When Tess left for New York the next afternoon, it was not without exacting a promise from Katherine McNair that she would follow her within a month or so for a visit.

## CHAPTER XVII

**B**Y the end of January it was clear to Tess that something would have to be done quickly about Todd Harlan. Thus far she had been humoring him, but it couldn't go on. She had lunched with him several times, had devoted at least ten evenings to dinner, to supper and midnight-to-morning hootch-and-dance clubs with him. And on each occasion he had betrayed more and more the desire to pilot her into a secluded corner and make love to her. She had curtailed her engagements with Chip Thorndyke and surrounded her meetings with that young department-store magnate with safeguarding restrictions, because of the qualifying fact that he was already a married man. Yet she did not see why she should be according Todd special privileges on the ground of their old friendship. Chip was at least a lively, humorous and attractive companion. Todd was emphatically not. He was too restless and unhappy.

When he called her up, therefore, at the Maison Ricard late on a January afternoon and declared that he must see her that evening, she was uncertain at first what to do. Finally she decided that she

would see him in order to tell him flatly and finally that, unless he altered his behavior toward her, she could no longer go out with him.

Yet she looked neither triumphant nor self-confident as she met him in the lobby of the Belfridge, where he awaited her, oddly impatient and obviously ill-at-ease. She refused his suggestion, however, that they dine in a private room, and he was forced to be content with a secluded table in the alcove of the main dining-room. Moreover, she insisted on dancing every time the orchestra played, which did not help him in the important task he had set for himself.

Finally, after perceiving that finalities could no longer be evaded, she turned to him with studious and solemn eyes. Then she quietly inquired, over her demi-tasse, "Well, Todd, old boy, what's worrying you?"

"I don't like to talk about it here, Tess."

"It will have to be here or nowhere, I'm afraid." And he knew, by her face, that there was a will of iron beneath the voice of velvet.

"All right then," he agreed, and lowered his own voice. "Tess, I'm sailing for France to-morrow. I'm going to Paris to get a divorce from my wife."

Tess sat back, startled.



“I didn’t tell you the whole truth that first time I had lunch with you when I said she’d gone to France. She ran away from me with another man. Draper Brenon. You may not know it, but he’s a pretty bad lot. Been mixed up as co-respondent in several divorce-suits, and I should have known better than to pal around with him. But I suppose it’s just as well. If it hadn’t been Brenon it would have been some other chap like him. Sally simply isn’t a one-man woman. I’m fearfully busy, you know, and she’s had nothing to do but play around. Neither had Brenon. They drifted together. Partly my fault, I suppose. He has no money, and I fancy he ran away with her on the chance I’d buy him off and hush the matter up.”

“Oh, Todd, it can’t be that bad!” gasped Tess, with a small movement of mingled horror and incredulity.

But the gray-faced man went on with his story.

“Two months ago I’d probably have been sap enough to buy the beggar off. I loved Sally then, even in the face of what she’d done. But I don’t now. It’s over. I’m going to divorce her, in France, where it’s easy. I’ve got a good reason for doing it.” He paused and looked at Tess, hungrily. It was the same look of hunger that she had seen

in the face of Bob Brandt. Then Todd added, "You're the reason, Tess."

"I?" she asked blankly, and something heavy closed her heart.

"You know I love you, Tess," he urged, leaning over so far toward her that she drew away and looked anxiously around. "I guess I've always loved you since you were a kid. I've been unhappy since the day I married Sally. She's a spoiled and selfish child—but there, I'm not going to knock her. She's hit me hard—but as I said before, that's over. With you I know it would be different. I could be happy again, and I know I could make you happy. I've got enough in my own name now to chuck business forever. We could travel, go abroad, do about anything you say. You'd never have to lift your hand to do another stroke the rest of your life. What do you say, Tess? Do you, could you, love me?"

At that moment she was glad, for her own sake, that he was not the lean-faced, clean-limbed hero Todd Harlan of old. For then perhaps he could have swept her off her feet with his ardent love-making and his promises of riches and ease. He might have made her forget Jim Hogan. He might have persuaded her that she loved him in spite of herself. And it would have been just as big a mis-

take then, she felt, as it would be now for her to yield to him. She did not love him. The fact that this was a self-indulged, beaten-by-life Todd Harlan sitting opposite her arguing so desperately his hopeless cause made her feel sorry for him, but it magnified in her heart the conviction that she didn't love him, that she never had, that she never could love him. And girls had to think more than men imagine about this problem of marriage.

"I don't love you, Todd," Tess told him, kindly enough. "If you're getting your divorce just on the chance of marrying me, don't do it. I like you, and I'm sorry. But that's all."

He slumped back into his chair and stared morosely at the cigarette he was nervously pinching out against the ash-receiver. The sight of him huddled there, broken and discouraged, touched her. But then, she thought, he was not yet thirty, with most of life ahead of him. Men aren't wounded permanently before thirty by love.

Her lips twitched and crinkled into a smile. She nursed the impression as she sat studying his face, that she had learned a great deal about life since she had come to the city.

"Buck up, old boy," she was finally able to urge, with compassionable quietness, "buck up! You're not hit so hard as all that. Your wife's simply dam-

aged your pride by preferring another man to you. If you don't want her back badly enough to forgive her, get your divorce and start over again. There are still plenty of nice girls for a chap like you, Todd. And you're wrong about me. I'm merely the lamp-post you leaned against when you got hit. You got along very nicely without me until you happened to run into me. And you'll get along just as well when you move on again."

"I've only started to live," he contended, "since I met you on Fifth Avenue that day."

It seemed strange that she should be able to talk about love and marriage and destiny in this casual way. A year ago in Marysville and it would have been out of the question.

"Oh, you were very much alive before that," she reminded him, with a barricading effort at laughter. "So, please, Todd, don't fool yourself—or me. And now they're playing *After the Storm*, our favorite fox-trot, and you've simply got to snap out of it and dance with me."

Though he protested, he yielded and arose at the first encore, and when they resumed their chairs again she had the qualified satisfaction of noting that his pathetic face was clearing a little.

"Let's move on to a show and some quiet place for a drink and a dance afterward," he found the

courage to suggest out of that newly achieved fortitude.

"I'll go to the theater with you, Todd, if you'll make it something lively," she agreed. "But I can't dance any more to-night. I want to go home and think about things."

She was both sorry for Todd and impatient with him. He had had everything showered upon him, yet he had made rather a sorry mess of it all. Like most girls with their eyes fixed on the future, she was phantasmally intolerant of failure.

Just outside the door of the dining-room, she stood meditatively by while Todd reclaimed his hat and stick and coat in exchange for the customary bribe. She was in no mood to fence amusedly with the admiring glances of the entering male diners. She had permitted her contemptuously appraising eye to rest for a second upon the vapidly pretty face and the handsome ermine cloak of a typical little blonde gold-digger standing near, when she became aware of something familiar about the generous contours of the girl's escort, who had stopped almost at Tess's elbow to shed his wraps. In almost the same instant he saw her. It was Luther Swett.

His chubby face broke into a benevolent smile as he greeted her.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he exuded. "I

haven't seen you in a long time. Sorry I can't stop and chat. My—er—niece is waiting." She saw indeed that the baby-faced blonde was tapping her silver slipper upon the carpet and regarding Tess with a keen look that did not exactly match her ingénue make-up. Evidently she beheld in Tess a possible rival. "When may I see you again?" Swett lingered and cajoled.

"I'm really rather busy," Tess parried.

"I'm giving a little wedding-party at Pickwick Arms, in Greenwich, for a stage friend of Verlyna's a week from Sunday," he urged. "I'd be mighty glad to have you join us. We're going up and back in my car. Couldn't you come along?"

Tess hesitated.

"We need a touch of youth and beauty to brighten us up," persisted the man at her side. And Tess smiled her gratitude and finally accepted. She was still smiling as Todd, gloved and coated for the cold outdoors, appeared at her side.

"Hello, Swett!" He saluted the financier indifferently, and the two men shook hands, apparently none too pleased to see each other.

"I didn't know you two were acquainted," said Tess.

"Oh, yes, Harlan and I have done business together in the Street," wheezed Luther Swett, and

then, with an anxious glance toward his now glowering companion, he explained, "I must be going, though. Don't forget, Miss McGuire, a week from Sunday. I'll call for you about three."

"You turn me down, and yet you team up with that old pirate," Todd growled as they hurried through the foyer toward the main entrance of the hotel.

"There's no harm in accepting an invitation to ride in his car, is there?" she demanded.

"Swett's automobile-rides frequently lead to complications," he warned.

"This one won't."

She hadn't the heart to tell Todd that she had seen the show before when he revealed to her that it was the *Follies* they were visiting. Mr. Ziegfeld's exhibit, she decided, had been more fun when she witnessed it in company with Jim and the Blakes than it was with this silent and disappointed married lover as her seatmate.

After the show he again urged her to prolong the evening with him, but she firmly declined. So he glumly piled her into his sedan and failed to urge her to snuggle over to him for warmth, as he had boyishly done on other occasions. He was silent during the ride through the snow-piled streets to her boarding-house and seemed so broken and safe

that she did not protest when he followed her out of the car up to her door and waited while she turned the key in the lock. Then suddenly, with the door half open, he seized her convulsively in his arms and kissed her. He kissed her violently on the lips before she realized her danger. The blood flared into her face and she plunged her fists into his broad chest and pushed him back, standing a few feet away and panting angrily.

Recovering herself, she asked, "Why did you have to do that, Todd?"

"I love you," he answered unsteadily, plainly not yet himself.

"It's a funny way of showing it," she retorted. "Do I seem like the sort of a girl who likes to be mauled that way?"

"I don't know whether you like it," and his voice had turned a little bitter, "but you invite it."

She bristled. "I beg your pardon."

He made a half-puzzled and a half-hopeless gesture with both of his great palms.

"Maybe not. I don't know. All I know is that all the time I've been with you I've wanted to do just that—take hold of you and kiss you till it hurt."

"I don't understand that kind of love," she replied, though it came to her as a bit of a shock, his



echoing so nearly what other men had told her. "I don't think it's love at all. It's something uglier. And now I think you'd better go."

"Won't you even come down to the dock tomorrow and say good-by to me?" he pleaded. "Won't you give me something to hope for?"

"I can't get away. And I don't think I would if I could."

Frankness, after all, was the best medicine for men who so easily forgot themselves.

He sighed. "Good-by then," he said and held out his hand.

She took it, troubled by her own tangle of emotions. He looked so utterly abject that she had an impulse, out of pure charity, to kiss him briefly and flee. But she knew he would misunderstand. So she contented herself with a friendly hand on his shoulder. She let it rest there for one prolonged moment. Then she turned and left him.

As she turned, after closing the door, to go up the half-dark stairway to her room, she was aware of a shadowy and bulky presence just inside the darkened parlor.

Tess hesitated, one foot on the first step, and said with emphasized clearness, "Good evening, Mrs. Binner." Her landlady was given to night-prowling and a gnawing curiosity about her boarders'

affairs, Tess knew; and this was not the first time Tess had resented it to the elderly woman's face.

Realizing she had been discovered, the kimono-clad widow stepped defiantly forth. She did not like Tess. She regarded with suspicion the fine clothes this high-spirited girl with her fine manners and sharp tongue wore, her dapper young men of another class who were obviously so out of place in the Binner parlor when they sat waiting for her, and the over-luxurious cars they arrived and departed in. There was something fishy about it to Mrs. Binner, there was! She had always kept a respectable house, she had! And that young Mr. Hogan must be blind!

"I just waited up to remind you, Miss McGuire," said the landlady, both her chins thrust forward, "that you're owing me two weeks' board and—"

"I'll pay you here and now," announced Tess, stepping out under the dim light. She opened her pocketbook and fished for the necessary amount. The very amplitude of the disinterred roll of bills brought a disdainful sniff from Mrs. Binner's nostrils.

Conscious of that half-sneering calm, Tess was uneasily wondering how much Mrs. Binner had seen of Todd's sudden embrace. She found out immediately.

“I want to say too,” Mrs. Binner rumbled on, counting the money, “that I don’t like goings-on on my premises such as I happened to see just before you came in. I ain’t used to having girls like you—”

“‘Just happened to’—that’s funny,” Tess laughed mirthlessly. She took a step toward the fuming landlady, the McGuire danger-signal flashing into her eyes. “You mind your own business as far as I’m concerned, Mrs. Binner, and I’ll take care of mine. I pay my board. That’s all you want of me, and that’s more than a lot of these scandal-hounds around here do. You’re not my guardian; you’re my landlady only. And the next time I catch you spying on me, I’ll move.”

Mrs. Binner contented herself with unintelligible mutters as Tess mounted the stairs. The rooming business was bad enough at present, and, as Tess said, “that fast McGuire girl,” had at least the one virtue of paying her way. She was of the kind who could afford to. Yet Tess would never have allowed her bill to run on two weeks had she been less occupied with other things. You must pay as you go—that was one of the lessons the city had already taught her. And she assured herself, before she fell asleep that night, that she was willing to pay.

Tess's alarm clock had sounded, the next morning, and she was lying, one eye on the too-swift moving hands, greedily resting until the very last possible moment, when she heard somebody descending the stairs from the third floor. A knock sounded on her door. Suspecting it was Jim, she arose, slipped into her dressing-gown and opened the door. She saw Jim's wide shoulders blocking the light. She also saw that he was very much excited about something.

"Tess, I've heard from Detroit," he told her. "They're interested. They want me to come right out there while they hold tests on my carburetor. See—here's the letter."

He handed the crumpled sheet to her and she rubbed her sleepy eyes and read it.

"That sounds fine. Are you going?"

He nodded. "On the Wolverine at five this afternoon. I couldn't sleep for thinking about it. I'm going to try to get permission from the boss for the time off, and if he crabs, I'm going to chuck up my job. It's worth it. This is big-time stuff, Tess."

She shivered a little.

"I can't stand here talking to you in these clothes," she protested. "I'll get dressed in a hurry and see you at breakfast."

His excitement was infectious. By the time they had finished their meal and were traveling downtown in the Subway together, she was listening with intent and narrowed eyes to his repeated but still perplexing ideas on vaporization projectors and gasoline.

She rushed out early to be on time to see him off at the Grand Central that afternoon. Hurrying through the moiling crowds, she caught sight of his bulky figure standing anxiously beside a veteran suit-case in front of the iron-grilled gate labeled "Wolverine Express." His clothes were cheap and needed pressing. His hair was unkempt, and his worried glance as it moved here and there in search of her carried little of the assured confidence of a man about to negotiate the business deal that would make or break him forever. But she achieved a bold enough front as she greeted him.

"Don't let these people put anything over on you, Jim," she urged with all the sophistication she imagined her own knocking about in the business-world had given her.

"Don't worry," he stiffened. "I'm not the usual boob-inventor. If they want to do business with me, they'll pay."

She was encouraged. Perhaps it *was* the clothes, after all. If there had been time, she would have

bullied him into buying an entirely new outfit, forcing him to borrow the money from her if necessary. For clothes always counted.

“But how about you?” He turned to her gravely, almost timidly. “You won’t let anybody put anything over on *you* while I’m away, will you?”

“Don’t worry,” she laughed in turn. “I’m not one of these boob country-girls, up to the city to see the fair.”

He did not fancy that laugh. There was something metallic, something defensively hard about it. It wasn’t Tess’s old frank and merry laugh.

“I may be gone a month or so,” he explained wistfully. “They’ll want to tear the thing apart and put it together again, and hold all kinds of tests.” He hesitated, cleared his throat. “You won’t let any of these rich guys rush you off your feet while I’m gone, will you, Tess?”

It was one of the few times he had mentioned her other men friends. “You’ll be waiting for me—clean—won’t you, just as you’ve always been?”

“Why not?”

The attendant at the gate was consulting his watch and hooking up all but one of the restraining chains across the polished entrance-rails. Jim took her hand, in spite of the coldness of her last ques-

tion. Leaving her had drained some of his confidence away.

“I may put this over,” he urged. “There’s a good chance I’ll come back with a paper in my pocket that’ll mean I’m out of the side-street class. If I do, Tess, will you marry me? Will you?”

She lowered her head.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly.

He was disappointed. He was also hurt. But he kept on, edging a little nearer the gate. “You care for me, don’t you?”

She raised her face.

“I think so.” Then, pouring all the doubt and confusion of the past months into her voice, “Oh, Jim, it’s so hard to know for sure.” And flinging her arms around his neck, she kissed him quickly and thrust him away from her, just ahead of the closing gate.

## CHAPTER XVIII

**S**HE missed Jim. Indeed, absent, he seemed to exert more of an influence on her life than he had while she knew he was always just on the floor above her, available at her beck and call.

For a week she did not make an engagement, telling herself half-humorously that she was being faithful to Jim, persuading herself that she was doing a little penance for his sake. She would not admit that the pace she had been leading, and even her job, was beginning to pall on her a trifle. Perhaps it was because of a recently conceived and persistent idea that her health was not so sound as it used to be and that the causes were late hours, nerves continually on edge, too rich food and too much tobacco-laden air. Perhaps, and more likely, she was slowly but surely getting a truer perspective upon herself.

Whether due to her own uneasy imagination or not, men seemed no longer quite content with what she had to offer them—her beauty, her laughter, her wit, her occasional yielding with moderation to their desire to be nice to her—all that had thus far been sufficient to attract them to her side in flattering



numbers. A dangerous note was slowly but surely creeping in. Thorndyke was always reaching out for something as yet unrealized, something more ominous, and she had continually to keep on guard. Even the sluggish Garretson was restless. And Brandt, perhaps the best of the lot—just what did his morosely strange actions imply?

Her job at the Maison Ricard was taking her—whither? It was still based upon the same insecure foundation as before, more insecure than ever, she thought grimly, as she recalled Arno Ricard's annoying attempts lately at familiarity. The novelty of Countess Patovska's presence in the fashionable establishment was wearing off. She had become a fixture with the fickle customers, like the mirrors and the mannequins. If she was to stay on there indefinitely, she concluded, it would be even more necessary to keep Ricard interested than it would be to keep the customers amused. She did not fancy playing that game with him.

When Luther Swett got her out of bed on Sunday morning to answer the telephone and reminded her of their engagement to drive out to Greenwich at three, her first impulse was to break the date. But it was a glorious, sunshiny day after nearly a month of gloomy weather. And she had been nowhere for a fortnight. So she decided to yield.

On the trip to Connecticut, Tess, seated beside Swett and the handsomely attired and rather supercilious Verlyna Charette, found the banker a much more serious-minded man than she had expected. He questioned her about herself, and, withholding the details of her position at the Maison Ricard, she told him of her crippled ambition to be an artist, about her neglected work at Brandt's studio.

He listened intently, watching her face as she talked. He was equally reserved on the ride home after the bride and groom (both of whom were veteran survivors of three or four similar mating ceremonies) had consumed his adroitly ordered supper and in a shower of rice had departed for New York.

But after Swett had dropped Verlyna at her Riverside Drive apartment and was proceeding eastward toward Mrs. Binner's, he loosened up a little. When he was about to leave her at her house-door, his passiveness slipped away entirely.

"It's just occurred to me, my dear, that I can get you into a better neighborhood than this," he said with fatherly matter-of-factness. "This really won't do, you know!"

Tess's gesture, as she inspected the diminishing row of ash-cans, was one of hopelessness.

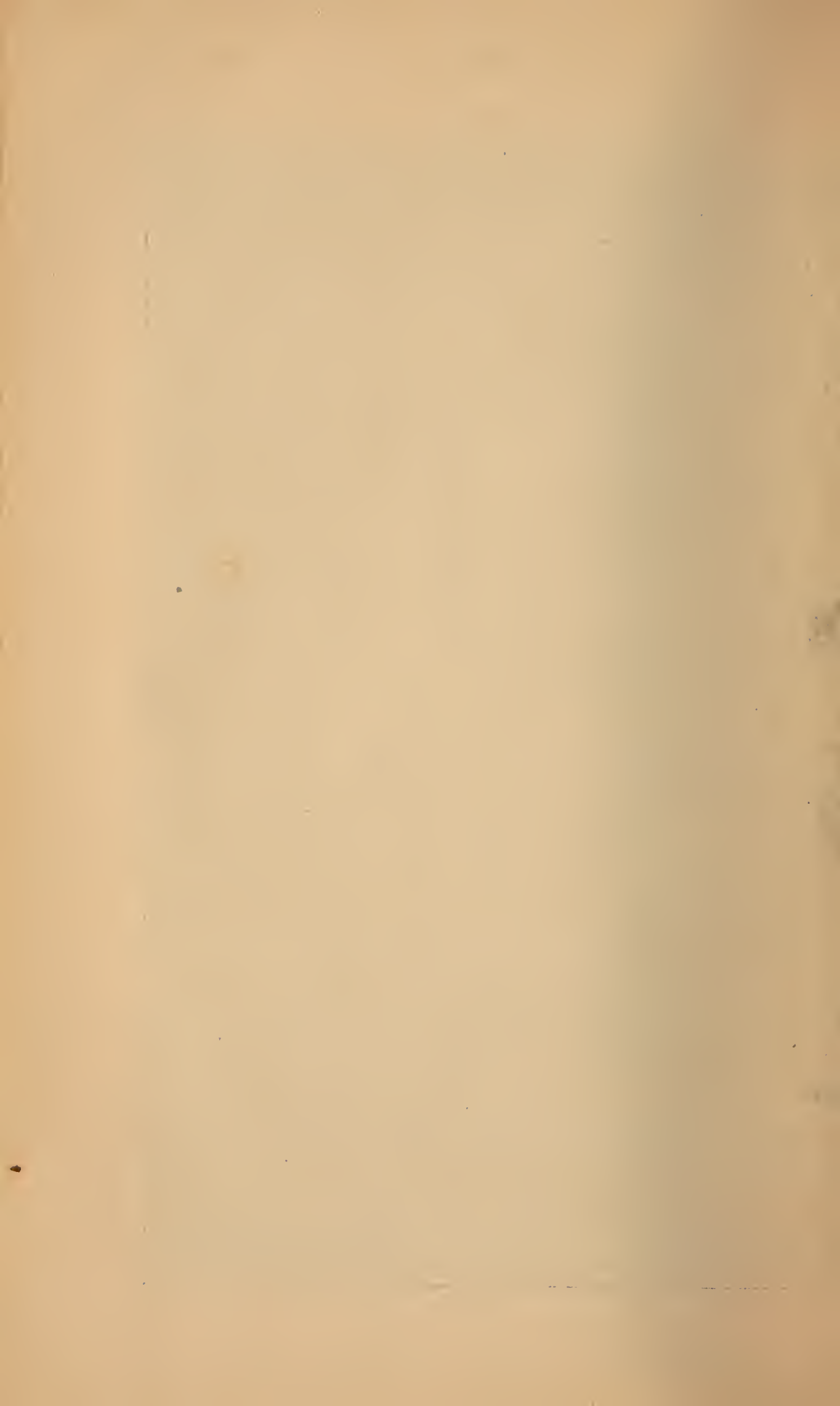
"I've a portrait-painter friend named Nast, Ken-



*A Paramount Picture.*

"CUTTING IN" WAS THE ORDER AT RICARD'S PARTY.

*Manhandled.*



dal Nast, who's just off for Europe," explained Swett. "He has a studio in a building of mine on Fifty-seventh Street. It's not a bad little place. And it's standing there empty and waiting for somebody to look after it."

Her pulse quickened, in spite of herself.

"Do you mean you're offering me the use of this place?" she asked as quickly as she was able.

"I imagine you would be doing Nast a service in looking after his things through the spring and summer," Swett casually reminded her.

"But that," she demurred, "would leave me under such an obligation to you."

"It's Nast's studio, not mine," he pointed out. "I'm merely passing it on to you if you care to use it."

"But that would be taking something for nothing," she still objected, disturbed by some deep-seated voice of instinct that would not down.

"I think you deserve it," proclaimed her quiet-voiced benefactor.

"But that's just the trouble. I don't. And I'd still be too much in your debt."

"You could get rid of that very easily," he announced.

"How?" she asked, with an unconscious sharpening of the voice.

His urbanity, apparently, was unshakable.

“By letting me drop in on you now and then, when you’ve an idle hour. Don’t misunderstand me, my dear. I wouldn’t want to be a nuisance and I’d come only when I was definitely asked. But at my age one has rather a love for quietness and color. And where you are there always seems to be color.”

“It’s mostly blue, these last few days,” she admitted with her temporizing small laugh. “No, your offer is very kind and I’m grateful for it, but I don’t think I can accept.”

He shrugged resignedly and assisted her with solicitous gallantry from the car.

During the next few weeks, as February slid damply into March and the first few touches of spring warmth began timidly to appear, she wondered many times if she had not been unwise and over-scrupulous not to accept Swett’s offer. Certainly her loyalty to her present abode was not due to any contentedness with it. For Mrs. Binner and the slatternly maid, the latter obviously under the landlady’s orders, had for a long time been subjecting Tess to a guerrilla warfare of petty annoyances. Her bed was slovenly made or not at all. Packages for her were deliberately mislaid or given by alleged mistake to other persons. She began missing things. At meals she was favored with

the least desirable and most miserly portions of everything. It was only the sentimental association of Jim with the place and the desire that he should find her there when he came back from Detroit that held her.

She received letters from Jim every day or so. The fate of the carburetor was in doubt. The company was still holding tests. They had constructed several duplicates of his mechanism, with him in an advisory rôle, and were trying them out on all possible models of cars. They had called in expert engineers from their other factories, and they were withholding their final reports. From his series of letters Tess could have constructed a maddeningly fluctuating graph of alternate optimism and gloom. Meantime, he was staying in Detroit, on the Detroit Accessories Company's pay-roll and working with the engineers who were making the tests. He had no idea when the verdict would be announced. He was making more money than he had in New York, but he was fearfully anxious to have it over with and to be with her, he wrote.

Her own hopes rose and fell in sympathy with his, for his sake. How deeply his success or failure concerned her own future, she hardly dared ask herself. The problem it opened was too big.

Jim, expecting when he left New York to be back:

in a few days, had not given up his room at Mrs. Binner's, and Tess had been looking after it for him against his return, putting his belongings under lock and key, taking care of his mail, even replacing his faded curtains with bright new chintz ones and safeguarding the suit of clothes he had left behind by installing it in a moth-proof bag.

The Monday on which Tess and Mrs. Binner came to the final parting of the ways dawned with a preliminary clash between them. Tess's laundry consignment of clean underthings was nowhere to be found. Impatiently calling for Mrs. Binner and the maid eventually revealed the fact that the bag had for no reason at all been deposited in the room across the way, which was occupied by a burlesque soubrette, a friend of Walters.

Words flew between boarder, mistress and maid and ceased only when Tess had to hurry down to breakfast and to work.

After dinner that night, Tess, as was her custom, ran up to Jim's room for possible mail. Even before she reached his door, she had a feeling that the room was occupied. With a mixture of joy over the possibility that it was Jim and of mystification, for nobody had mentioned his return and he had certainly not entered the house since her arrival from



work, she pushed open the door and immediately stepped back in surprise.

A red-faced, rough-looking young stranger was sitting on the bed in his shirt-sleeves and unpacking a suit-case packed with rumpled clothes. Sighting her and evidently believing that this was a marvelous boarding-house he had picked, what with a strikingly pretty girl popping in on him thus unannounced, he grinned boldly and saluted her, "Hello, kid. Come in."

Tess, flushed from anger more than confusion, for she grasped the situation in a twinkling, slammed the door and flew down to Mrs. Binner, who stood, arms akimbo, in the hallway below, evidently expecting some such eventuality.

"Have you rented Mr. Hogan's room to some one else?" Tess stormed.

"I didn't know as he was comin' back," Mrs. Binner snapped. "His rent ain't been paid for three weeks."

"Why didn't you remind me?" demanded the girl. "You knew I'd have paid it." She started to pass Mrs. Binner and go to her own room for her pocketbook. "I'll pay it now."

"It's too late," the landlady stoutly asserted. "The room's rented. And I don't think *you've* got

any right or reason to dictate to me about my boarders."

"What do you mean?" Tess asked with dangerous quietness.

"Just what I said. You're no gentle dove yourself."

Slowly but steadily Tess's Celtic rose. She whitened and advanced upon the flabby Mrs. Binner, advanced until the latter stepped backward and reached blindly for the newel-post at the head of the stairs, prepared to flee.

"You loose-tongued old scandalmonger," Tess blazed. "I've taken from you all I'm going to. Now I'm through. I'll get out in the morning and I'll take Mr. Hogan's stuff with me. And if I wasn't afraid of soiling my hands on you, I'd wring your neck!"

And abandoning the pallid Mrs. Binner, Tess hurried to her room, whipped the door shut with a bang and flung herself, weeping from excitement and nervous strain, upon her bed.

The next morning, having spent an all but sleepless night, she realized the necessity for crossing her Rubicon. She called Luther Swett on the telephone and said, as calmly as she could, "If your offer to have me use Mr. Nast's studio apartment still holds good, I'll be glad to accept it."

"I'm glad you're being reasonable," was the retarded answer over the wire.

A note from him, the next day, announced that the arrangements had all been made and that the keys would be delivered to Tess, by the resident engineer, on demand. Her benefactor hoped that she would be comfortable in her new quarters. He further hoped that, if she met with any difficulties, she would not hesitate to call him up on his return to the city, which he was leaving for a few days on a business-trip.

Tess's last scruples vanished, at the impersonality of that brief but kindly note. They returned, it is true, when she found herself confronted by the unexpected luxuriousness of the studio-apartment, with cut-flowers on her *Louis Quinze* writing-desk and a satin carton of bonbons on the teakwood trivet beside her *chaise longue*. She shivered with womanly joy at the white-tiled purity and privacy of the diminutive bathroom, after Mrs. Binner's communal bathing-den with the residuary lather-lines about its tub. She thrilled foolishly at the beauty of the toy-like sleeping-quarters, all done in old rose and ivory, and seemed to inhale from its narrow casement-window a rarer and lighter air, enjoying even the carbon-monoxide that floated up from the motor-exhausts of the ever-murmurous street. It was an

odor that kept reminding her she had crept a little closer to the core of things. And there was happiness in being at the core of things.

Along the horizon of her happiness, however, lurked one small cloud which she could not define, one vague trouble which she refused to articulate. She had told Jim all about her change of residence in an impassioned six-page letter while her wrath against Mrs. Binner was running high and before she had begun to think about what accepting Swett's proposal really meant. Even at that, she now admitted, her letter had been rather guardedly worded in spots. She had given Jim her address, it is true, but she avoided all speculation on what he might think of the betrayingly fashionable sound of it,

But when, that first night of lonely unrest, in the sudden conscientious determination to resume her long-neglected art-work she let herself into Brandt's studio with her key and the artist himself dashed back for a half-hour between dinner and an alleged conference over a new commission, she was reluctant to explain her migration from Mrs. Binner's.

"Your work is very slovenly," he commented brutally, standing beside her a few moments and watching her daubs. "You don't spend enough time on it."

When she glanced up, about to make a sharp

retort, the look in his eyes told her he was thinking more about her than he was about the poorly executed place-cards. And that both stirred and alarmed her.

“You’re never here to help me any more,” she complained. “I’d come every night this week, and work like a dog, if you’d only give me a hand.”

He hesitated, regarding her intently. “All right,” he finally agreed.

But the next evening Garretson appeared with a suggestion to see Charlot’s Revue, which had been praised to her as the cleverest show in town. She found it hard to resist. In the end, in fact, she yielded. And with that mood of recklessness still on her, she decided to explain both her absence and her change of residence to the artist.

Over the telephone she found it much easier to talk to Brandt and explain what at first had seemed inexplicable. Yet he stood so long in silence after she had done her best to make everything about her presence in Nast’s apartment clear that she thought he had hung up the receiver. It was only after her repeated call to him that she heard his voice again. And then he merely said, “You know best.”

Tess’s brow was clouded as she housed her transmitter in the flounced Madame Pompadour that made up her telephone-screen. But the vague trouble

at the root of her triumph did not definitely outline itself until Luther Swett, almost a week later, called her up on what proved to be his private wire. He inquired, paternally enough, if everything had been made comfortable for her. He asked, almost as an after-thought, if he might venture to drop in for a moment or two on his way up-town that evening.

That request, formal and perfunctory as it sounded, disturbed her very much. It seemed to be the first confirmation of a misgiving that was growing within her by the hour, not only about her occupancy of Swett's apartment but about her whole mode of living.

"I'm sorry," was her slightly tremulous reply over the wire, "but I've a business engagement immediately with Mr. Brandt."

"You wouldn't care to slip out of that for me?" he suggested.

"I'm afraid not."

"Well, youth calls unto youth the same as deep calls unto deep," she heard the blithely forlorn voice saying to her. "But when you're being happy with the young, my dear, don't altogether forget the old. I want to talk to you, when the chance comes, about what may be a real help to you in your art-work."

"I feel you've already helped me too much," protested the none too happy Tess.

“That’s the finest thing life gives us old fellows,” was Luther Swett’s somewhat wistfully uttered reply. “Every now and then it lets an old has-been like me give a hand-up to a young would-be like you. But I don’t want to be a blundering nuisance about it. So when you have an empty hour, my dear, give me a ring and let me know.”

She thanked him with a forced lightness of note that did not go well with the unsteadiness of her hand as she hung up the receiver. She sat staring down at the flounced Madame Pompadour, trying to fortify herself with the thought that it had all been formal and perfunctory, that it was all based on one of those impersonal and generous impulses with which life occasionally confronts one.

But there was something in front of her, something just beyond the next turn in her tangled road of life, of which she stood wordlessly afraid.

## CHAPTER XIX

**B**Y the middle of April, Tess had become convinced that her continuance in the rôle of Countess Patovska at the Maison Ricard was soon to become entirely dependent upon the response she made to the perfumed Gallic proprietor's increasingly embarrassing attempts to shower attentions upon her. Yet money, more than ever before, was essential to her. Her connection with the celebrated gown-establishment could have ended at once, but for that problem of money. For, though the item of clothes was automatically eliminated from her pecuniary worries by the fact that her apparel in all but a few essentials was furnished by the Maison Ricard, she had discovered that living in the studio of Mr. Swett's friend, Kendal Nast, entailed a much larger expenditure than did her modest quarters at Mrs. Binner's. There were tips to be continually distributed. There were appearances to keep up. Adapting the apartment in a few details from masculine to feminine tenancy had also involved expenses. And one did not go from such luxurious surroundings to breakfast at basement automats



or return there from dinner at Child's. In short, Tess needed the seventy-five dollars a week Ricard was paying her, and she saw no immediate prospect of securing that much compensation somewhere else.

But the job had developed into a burdensome and unprofitable bore. The ever-changing kaleidoscope of expensive clothes paraded before her no longer held its original thrill. The conversation of Ricard's rich customers was not even as entertaining as that of Pinkie Doran. She knew her Russian rôle by heart and played it automatically, with her mind upon Jim and other things less important than him.

Thus, the first incident upon that eventful mid-April day which later turned out to be the most fateful twenty-four hours of her life, did not at the time greatly disturb her.

Soon after the shop opened, a tall, masculine-looking woman with a loud and bullying voice came bustling in. She was sailing for Europe in five days, she broadcast to Monsieur Ricard and his staff, and, by the force and bustle of her voice and personality, soon had practically the whole personnel of the place dashing about in her service. Madame Aug satisfied Tess's semi-aroused curiosity by whispering, between flights hither and yon, that the customer was Jane Dobell, the famous society-woman journalist, who had been many times around

the world, hobnobbed with the *crème-de-la-crème* of practically every civilized land, and from these high authorities had gleaned endless material for her writings. Incidentally, Mrs. Dobell for the past ten years had been specializing on Russia.

It was not until the writer, out of breath with her activities, sank into a chair beside her and craved tea that Tess saw in her a possible menace.

“Countess Patovska?” Mrs. Dobell paused over her steaming glass, and gazed penetratingly at Tess. “I do not recall the name. And I flatter myself that I am acquainted with all the Russian names of nobility of any importance.”

Tess parried this quickly by raising her chin a trifle arrogantly and clouding her voice with her strongest accent, “I beg pardone. I ’av ver’ few Englese.”

Whereupon the famous journalist astonished her by promptly breaking, with hoarse and tremulous voice, into a torrent of what Tess assumed to be Russian. When the babel stopped, Mrs. Dobell looked expectantly for a response. Inwardly horror-stricken, the girl’s nimble wit suggested the only recourse that seemed possible to save her. She rose unsteadily, staggered forward, and promptly started to weep as if her heart would break. Ricard, attracted already by the possibility of trouble, caught

the significance of Tess's hand, waving frantically behind her back out of sight of the sharp-eyed Mrs. Dobell. Hurrying up to Tess, he put a fatherly and protective arm about her heaving shoulders and explained to the astonished writer, "Poor Countess Patovska! Poor child—she can not endure any reference to her unhappy country. She always breaks down. I should have warned you."

And before a protest or a note of sympathy could issue from the mouth of Mrs. Dobell, he led Tess, still moaning, from the display-room into his private office. There she sank with profound relief into the massive depths of a leather-upholstered chair and slid back the turban from her perspiring brow.

"I thought the job was up for keeps," she acknowledged with a nervous laugh.

"You saved yourself very nicely," said Ricard, sliding on to the broad arm of the chair beside her and allowing his arm to rest carelessly on the back of the chair, very near to her. He was evidently anxious to replace his arm where it had been when he led her out of danger. She moved forward a little in the chair.

"Thanks to you," she smiled.

"Perhaps I could be of service to you often, if you would only permit me," he said significantly.

Then frankly putting his arm around her, he added, "Why do you always avoid me? Why don't you accept my invitations?"

She was never in her life so grateful for an interruption to a tête-à-tête as she was by the discreet knock on the door and the subsequent entrance of Madame Aug bearing a card. The card was for Tess. It contained the engraved cognomen of Mr. Charles Everett Thorndyke and had scrawled upon it in pencil, "Hello, Countess. How about dinner and a show to-night? Chip."

She looked up to find Ricard brazenly reading the card over her shoulder. Discovered, he asked carelessly, "Is Thorndyke a particular friend of yours?"

"He's a friend."

"Not a very close one, I hope. He's a bad fellow with the ladies, you know."

Tess laughed merrily. "That's funny. He said the same thing about you. So did Bob Brandt. And Chip warned me Bob was also a devil along the same lines. You men must all belong to the same club."

Ricard had been thinking of something else.

"I wonder," he said, looking at her in a way that labeled what he was going to say almost an order, "if you and Thorndyke would care to come around to my apartment to-night. I'm giving a party.

Just a few good friends, men and women. Regular people, all of them. That is, provided you wouldn't rather chuck him altogether and let me call for you. You haven't been treating me at all well, you know, in spite of all I have done for you. I am particularly anxious for you to come to-night. Will you?"

Politely and discreetly worded as the invitation was, she perceived that here was very nearly an ultimatum. She had an impulse to rise and refuse.

But she lacked the courage. She was not free. She had the future to think of. After all, it wouldn't mean anything tragic to accept. She would have Thorndyke along as a protector, doubtful pilot though he might seem.

"If you'll promise to let me leave early—I'll come," she qualified her acceptance, and Ricard agreed. She wrote "Okay. Party at Ricard's apartment. Call for me at nine. 'Countess.'"

The sly satisfaction she observed written on Ricard's face haunted her the rest of the day.

Tess had hardly returned to her rooms from dinner at a near-by tea-shop, and was just settling wearily into a chair after looking in vain for a letter from Jim as she had been doing with a similar lack of success ever since moving from Mrs. Binner's, when the bell buzzed.

She opened the door. An impressive-looking woman in an iridescent brown turban and severely brown tailored suit was standing on the threshold.

It was Verlyna Charette. She seemed as much surprised to find Tess confronting her as Tess was to see her.

“You’re not living here, surely?” questioned the older woman. “I saw the lights as I was passing in my car on the way to the theater. I was a trifle curious to know who could be in the studio. It holds a memory or two of mine—and I thought it was empty. Are you really living here, my dear?”

“Why not?” asked Tess, with an attempted smile that for some reason failed to register.

“But I happen to know this studio,” said the smartly-clad Miss Charette, with a second prolonged and slightly bewildered stare about her. “May I come in for a moment?”

“Of course,” was Tess’s answer. “Then you are a friend of Kendal Nast’s?”

“No, I’m not,” was the oddly delayed reply. “But I’m a friend of Luther Swett’s.”

“He’s been very kind to me,” said the girl with the gardenia-white skin, to bridge the silence that ensued. Yet she wondered why this resplendent and slightly faded beauty should be staring at her with eyes as sad and discerning as an old hound’s.

“Are you a good girl?” was the older woman’s quiet and unexpected query.

“What do you mean by a good girl?” asked the other, tingling with the thought that she was parrying for time and not looking for information.

“I don’t need to answer that. *Are you?*”

“I’ve always tried to be,” answered Tess, the last of her color gone.

“Are you trying now?”

“What is to prevent me?”

The older woman did not answer that question. But her meditative eyes remained fixed on the other’s face as she sank into a chair.

“I’m just wondering how clever you are,” said the woman with the lines of life which even her make-up could not obliterate.

“I don’t pretend to be clever,” said the girl with the troubled violet eyes.

“But could you pretend to be the other thing, in a setting like this?” inquired Miss Charette as her meditative eyes ranged about the orientalized studio with its rug-draped divan and its hammered brass lamps.

“In a setting like this?” repeated Tess, trying to understand. And she was conscious of the discerning cool eyes being once more fixed on her face.

“Does this impress you as the sort of studio a

man has lived in? The sort a man would live in?" questioned the older woman.

"I never thought much about that," admitted the other, the color once more mounting to her thin cheek.

"I'm afraid there are quite a number of things you haven't thought about," Tess's visitor reminded her.

"Do you mean I've done wrong in coming here?" challenged the girl.

"I mean it could be very sadly misunderstood," was the deliberately cool reply.

"It could never be misunderstood by the people who really know me," protested the other, "or who really know Mr. Swett."

"I know Mr. Swett," was Miss Charette's apparently inapposite reply.

"But this studio was empty, and he had no use for it," explained Tess, wondering why she should be standing on the defensive. "He has never said or done a questionable thing, from that night I first met him—that night when you were with him. He has been nothing but kind and generous, always."

The older woman moved her head slowly up and down. "There are kindnesses, my dear, that can eventually prove very cruel."



The unhappy girl swung about, at that, with a sudden hard light in her eyes.

“But Luther Swett is a friend of yours,” she proclaimed.

“He is—with reservations. And I’m rather fond of him, with the same reservations. I’m not accusing him, remember. And I know that young girls nowadays aren’t asking to be either guided or guarded—all they’re demanding is freedom. But I once heard of a big game hunter who waited three years to get a particular head he wanted.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with me,” protested the girl with the startled eyes.

“No; you don’t, or you wouldn’t be here,” replied the older woman as she rose to her feet. “Suppose I were to tell you that there is no such person as Kendal Nast, that this apartment has never been occupied by any one but Luther Swett and his—”

“I don’t believe you!” cried Tess, but without conviction.

“Very well,” shrugged the actress. “But it’s true. You might ask your friend Brandt to verify it.”

There was fierceness in Tess’s gesture as she swung about on her visitor.

“You’ve made this place so I can’t live in it,” she cried out, with almost a look of hate on her

face. But a smile lurked about the other woman's eyes, still sad and discerning as an old hound's.

"That's the most promising thing you could possibly say," was Miss Charette's quiet-noted reply. "I'm old enough to be your mother, my dear, and I've been through the mill. We all want to be free, but we can't. The best we can do is to remember Eliza and keep out on the ice a few jumps ahead of the bloodhounds."

The woman of the theater moved toward the stricken girl, with her gloved hand outstretched. But Tess drew away from that contact. She crossed the room and stood beside the window, very lonely, very remote, but oddly courageous.

"I see it, now," she said, in little more than a whisper.

The woman drew the folds of her scarf closer about her.

"Then I've nothing more to say," she asserted as she turned and moved toward the door. She stopped, on her way out, and looked back. "Good-by, my dear, and good luck," she murmured, as though to give selvage to a scene that threatened to remain without its due dramatic finish.

But Tess did not seem to hear her. She sank into a chair with her unsteady fingers locked together on her narrow lap.

It seemed very quiet in the studio. And she seemed alone in a world that had toyed with her and betrayed her and forgotten her.

She sat there for a long time. She felt no resentment against Verlyna Charette, even though, as Tess suspected, jealousy had been the motive of the actress's visit. Verlyna had set before her in cold words what she had been afraid to tell herself. It was simply the first warped fruit of the false harvest she had been sowing almost from the day she landed in New York. And in that moment she longed as never before for Jim Hogan. Her balance-wheel. The man she—yes—loved. She knew now that she loved him with all her heart. Why didn't he come? She had left word with both the day and night attendants in the corridor to summon her if a man named Hogan called, no matter when it was, and if she were not there, to open the door to him with their pass-key. And she had given them a minute description of Jim, refusing to notice their knowingly raised eyebrows. Why hadn't he written? Was her presence in this damnable place tearing him away from her, keeping him from writing her? She got up and paced the room, now suddenly grown hateful to her, and sat down again, nervously twisting her fingers.

And it was thus, a few minutes after nine, that

Chip Thorndyke's merry tinkling of her bell found her. It was a full minute before the memory of her engagement with Thorndyke and of Ricard's party came to her confused brain. Her first impulse then was either to refuse to answer the bell or to dismiss him on any excuse that came to her. But why? It might save her to go. It might drive back those bounding tides of self-hate. She would leave this place, forever, in the morning as well as she could to-night.

And so she opened the door to Chip and kept him grumbling and spilling cigarette-ashes everywhere, while she dressed.

"What's the matter, kid?" he asked carelessly, as he led her out to his car. "You're not looking so chipper. Let's chuck Ricard's shindig and shoot out into the country."

"No, thanks, Chip," she answered, forcing a wan smile. "I promised him I'd come. And promises ought to be kept."

"All right," he sighed, stretching his long form beside her in the tonneau of the limousine as his chauffeur was pressing the starter. "I understand he gives some rare old affairs—classy chickens and pre-war hootch. Suits me, if I can't have you to myself."

It was ten before Ricard, the scent of his favorite

perfume already copiously flavored with alcohol and his small eyes somewhat watery and bloodshot, opened the door to them. By the time she had discarded her wraps in the smoke-blue air of the room assigned to the ladies and walked out into the living-room of Ricard's ornate apartment and taken an appraising look around, she was quite sure she was in for a hectic time. The party in Brandt's studio, where she had first met her employer, she saw at a glance, had been a tame Girl Scouts' outing compared to this. Ricard's crowd, both male and female, was older, rougher, noisier and far more dangerous. Liquor seemed to abound everywhere, and there was a dismaying plenitude of concealed nooks and corners where paired-off couples were quite blatantly making love.

In five minutes the delighted Chip was right in the swing of it, dancing, flirting, joking, drinking with speed and abandon.

As Tess stood uncertainly back, her disgust rising by the second, Ricard came hurrying unsteadily up to her, put his arm about her and announced, "C'mon, Tess. Want to intr'duce you to all these people. Fine bunch of boys and girls. You'll like 'em. Have a drink." She declined the drink and was sorry she couldn't do the same to his guests.

Music burst forth from somewhere, and she found

herself dancing with Ricard. But even the dancing was a rowdy, maudlin affair. The narrow cleared space was jammed, and cutting in was the order of the hour. Men in various states of intoxication mulled around her, shouting, grabbing for her, swinging her away from first one partner, then another. Thorndyke and Ricard disappeared from view in the welter. Her slippers were ruined, her hair disheveled, her clothes pulled awry, as old men, middle-aged men, young men, but all with hard, red, puffy faces, pressed their disgusting bodies against her and jerked her around the room under the name of dancing.

Finally, when she was breathless and beaten from the unceasing whirl of it, after several dances and innumerable consistently refused offers of cocktails, Ricard found her again. He was further gone than before. He stood, in fact, utterly disgusting to her. Yet she permitted him to propel her out of the shouting, wrangling crowd into a divan in the foyer hall. Girls, she remembered, had their futures to think of.

“Been looking all over f’ you,” declared Ricard. “Want to talk with you—see. Privately. After the rest go, you stay—see?” His flushed face was near to her, his bloodshot eyes hard and packed with meaning.

She recoiled a little. She rose and, fearing to look back, fairly ran from him. At the foot of the stairs she encountered Chip. But Chip was busy entertaining two giggling chorus-girls with a display of crude and blowsy wit. He came, though reluctantly, when she motioned.

“Take me home, Chip, will you please—now?” she begged.

“Wha’ you ’fraid of, honey?”

“I’m afraid—of Ricard. And, as you said, I don’t feel well. Will you?”

Perhaps he read in her pleading, frightened eyes a predilection for his company alone. Or he assumed something equally alluring.

“Oh, be a sport and stick around,” he parried, none the less. But in a few minutes, working desperately and cleverly, she had won him. She dashed in for her wraps, and he met her at the foot of the stairs. And soon, to her infinite relief, she was away from the din and the danger, ensconced in the tonneau of Chip’s car speeding up-town.

Tess was tired, disillusioned, desiring nothing so much as to be left alone. It had been a mistake. She had turned to the wrong quarter for consolation. She could not even answer Chip’s cheerful and half-drunken chattering. She pulled away from him as he pressed closer to her. If, on top of every-

thing else, he should now get troublesome, she would scream, she felt. And in five minutes she became aware that to be troublesome was Chip's exact plan.

His groping hands had pushed the straps of the evening cloak from her bare shoulders, despite her efforts to replace it and hold him away.

"Please, Chip," she petitioned. "Not now."

His answer was to pull down the little roller shade that separated them from the chauffeur's eyes.

Suddenly he clutched her, with a new savagery. A wave of repugnance ran through her as she tried to free herself. But he was too strong.

"No, no, please," she panted, writhing to twist her face away from his lips. He kissed her full on the mouth, despite her efforts.

"How dare you maul me like that? Why can't you be a sport?" she cried, as soon as she recovered her breath. But he sat back, blinking, undisturbed in the face of her anger.

"I *am* a sport. I'm leaving a perf'tly good party to take you home 'cause you're not feeling well. That's being a sport, isn't it?"

One arm was still around her rumped waist. She shot a glance out of the car and saw that they were only three blocks from her home. If she could



hold him off just a little longer, she knew she could escape.

“’S little late for that up-stage stuff, don’t you think, li’l bob-cat?” he asked, eyes narrowed and face still close to hers. She knew then that she hated him. Her hate flamed higher as he seized her anew, wrenched her body toward him as she fought him wildly, kissed her with such brutal violence that his teeth gashed her lips. Sobbing convulsively in spite of herself, she attacked him with the fierceness of a tigress, hurled him with a lucky concentration of vehemence for an instant to one side, flung the door of the car open, and a second later, the car slowing down momentarily to glide around her corner, sprang out a foot ahead of his madly groping fingers. A wild running career of half a block landed her at the heavy entrance-door to her apartment-house and, rushing past a hall-man astonished out of his sleepiness, she speared into her cloak-pocket for her key.

Only when she had found it did she discover that her door was already half open and that another man’s face was peering down gravely at her from inside the room.

Unbelievably, out of tear-stained eyes, with her tousled hair a fitting setting for her fear-stricken face and her whole manhandled body fairly shouting

things that ought not to be true, she stared at him. Then, with a little cry of relieved recognition and joy, she threw her arms around him and brought her harassed body to rest against his.

“Jim! Jim,” she whispered. “You’ve come—  
Jim.”

## CHAPTER XX

ALL the way back from Detroit, Jim had been debating whether he would go to her. For he had read the odious thing between the lines in her letter about her acceptance of Luther Swett's offer of the luxurious studio-apartment that Tess's own blindness had not seen until Verlyna Charette opened her eyes. And he had unjustly but naturally given Tess credit for knowing what she was doing at the time she accepted. It wounded him, angered him. It made him stop writing to her, made him wish he had never loved her, made him almost wish she was dead and buried.

It took the edge entirely from his triumph when he was notified that, after long weeks of body-wearying work and brain-wearying worry, his carburetor had been finally accepted. When he had stood in the Grand Central that night, the precious paper that would make him wealthy under the generous royalty arrangement resting safely in his pocket, he waited for a full ten minutes in the midst of the eddying crowds, pathetically wondering what to do. The worry hadn't slipped from his head

with the acceptance of his invention, as he had been promising himself it would. It beat against his brain more heavily than ever.

Something very powerful, something he couldn't quite explain, had driven him into the subway and up to this hateful cement-and-marble pile to Tess. He hardly heard the smartly uniformed doorman incredulously ask him, for some unknown reason, "Mr. Hogan?" and smile and open the door and set his bag down inside this cool and delicately shaded little paradise of an apartment. He had doggedly told himself he would wait an hour for her, listen to what she had to say for herself—though what could she have to say?—then tell her, keeping his temper if possible, what he thought of her, and go away. He'd pour out the acids that were corroding his soul, and then beat it, damn it, forever.

So Jim had stood at Tess's window, peering up and down the black street. Then suddenly had come that madly flying streak of white out of the lurching limousine. A torn and disheveled woman, followed for a moment by a drunken man. 'And that woman was Tess, the Tess he had once thought good. He had not pulled the door wholly open before she was there beside him, clutching him, sobbing and calling out his name.

The maelstrom of emotions within Jim Hogan's



*Manhandled.*

AS THE TAXI SLOWED DOWN, TESS LEAPED OUT.

*A Paramount Picture.*



breast set his face twitching. He wouldn't look at her, crying. He was afraid of what he would do. It would be dead wrong, he tortured himself, yielding an inch to her now. It was too late: She had deliberately done him dirt, had done herself dirt, and—

He drew her grimly into the room and shut the door. Then he held her drooping mauled body at arms' length and peered, teeth-gritted, into her face. Recovering fast, she was trying bravely now to smile and to show her pleasure at his coming.

"Oh, Jim," she cried, "is everything all right? Did they take your carburetor? Are you—we—rich?"

"They took the carburetor," he said slowly and deliberately, "but everything isn't all right."

"Why, Jim? What's wrong?" She clutched at him, a new fear assailing her. And he turned on her, his passion gathering force as it was released.

"Everything—you—this place you're living in. That's what's wrong. I asked you when I left to watch your step, to keep clean. And, by God, you haven't! No girl can stay straight and hit the pace you've been going since I went away. I'm wise—at last. I saw what happened in that limousine. I know that car. Thorndyke used to keep it in our garage. Look at yourself—all shot to pieces—

soiled and mauled! Look at this place you're living in, the clothes you're wearing, the other stuff in the closet over there! A girl like you don't own that kind of stuff. She don't own them honestly!"

"Jim!" she gasped. "I wrote you how I got this place. And those clothes are borrowed from Ricard. They're part of my job."

"And those finger-marks all over you," he cried as he pointed savagely at the red scrapes and blotches on her arms. "Are they part of your job too?"

His words snapped out like the lash of a whip. The harsh injustice of them, from Jim, abruptly stopped her weeping. They calmed her and enabled her to face him, wanting him, loving him, but stung into her own defense.

"Don't you love me any more, Jim?" she asked quietly. "Don't you want me?"

"No, by God, I don't. You're manhandled!" And still again he blurted out, "No." Then he stared at her. His hands dropped helplessly to his sides. His mouth quivered as he said, "I don't know. You're like the goods you used to sell in Thorndyke's basement. Mauled and manhandled, not clean and fresh like they were at first. You're not the Tess I used to know; you're not even the Tess you were when I left."



He looked at her hopelessly, the fire of anger dying out of his eyes, stricken now with the thought of losing her. For lose her he must. It would hurt. But these were things no straight man quibbled over.

“I get you, Jim,” replied Tess, her voice husky but calm. Brandt, she remembered, had used the same words about her. She was manhandled. She was soiled. But she was pure at heart. “And the worst of it is,” she found herself saying to the white-faced Jim, “that every appearance shouts you’re right, and yet you’re dead wrong. I’ve played around with fire. I *am* manhandled. I’ve been foolish, crazy. I shouldn’t ever have entered this place, I know. I shouldn’t have trusted Chip and the rest. But I’m still as good and pure as I ever was.”

“That would be hard to believe,” was Jim’s cold-noted retort.

“If you really loved me, you’d have faith enough in me to believe,” she declared, with rising spirit. She was down, but she wouldn’t be trampled on.

“If I really loved—God, if I didn’t really love you I wouldn’t give a damn what you were,” he cried vehemently. “I’d grab you, soiled or not, like those other woman-hunters. That’s the trouble—I wish to God I didn’t—” And he abruptly

checked himself, snatched up his hat and bag, and started blindly for the door.

"Jim," she called after him, a strange light of understanding and sudden resolution in her eyes. "Where are you going?"

He stopped and looked back. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Mrs. Binner's, I guess."

"She's taken away your room. I wrote you about that, you remember."

"I'll go there anyway. She'll put me up for the night."

It was not until he had the door open that her mind cleared and she suddenly called out, "Jim, if it will show I'm right will you come here to-morrow when I send for you?"

She was like a drowning woman snatching at a straw, but her voice was firm and cool.

"I don't see—"

"Will you come?"

"When?"

"To-morrow night."

What more did she want of him? To taunt him? But then he looked closely and saw the honest pleading in her eyes. He stood silent a moment. Then he said quietly, "*I'll come.*"

## CHAPTER XXI

**B**Y noon the next day, Tess, by working feverishly had all her things packed ready to leave Luther Swett's studio. It was then that she went to the telephone and called up the too generous banker.

"You asked me to tell you when I had a spare hour," she reminded him.

"Yes?" was the non-committal reply from Swett.

"Could you come to the studio at nine o'clock to-night?" Tess asked, with an uncontrollable *tremolo* in her throat.

"Just what does that mean?" inquired the suave voice over the wire.

"It means, I want to see you very, very badly," was the girl's answer, followed by a ponderable silence.

"I'll be there," replied the still shrewdly non-committal voice.

No warmer tone had crept into that answering voice, but it brought a faint chill to the listening girl's body.

Then with an odd hardening of her tired young

face she called up Carl Garretson and to him issued the same invitation. And after that she sent the same deliberately provocative message to Chip Thorndyke, Bob Brandt and Arno Ricard, ending up with an anxious reminder to Jim, phoned at the Binner supper-hour, that she was looking for him to keep his promise.

It was Garretson who came first, that night, proclaiming that she looked pale in her plain street-dress of blue jersey cloth. His eyes widened perceptibly as Bob Brandt stepped into the studio, and the perplexity of both men increased with the advent of the stern-browed Jim, who gazed with open disapproval and a questioning appeal to Tess at the table so carefully laid for seven. That sense of inward tension grew still stronger with the entrance of Chip Thorndyke, who searched the faces of the silent men and then smiled sardonically at the resolute-eyed young woman who watched the door as Luther Swett stepped quietly yet covertly into that somewhat puzzled circle. Arno Ricard sauntered in at last.

“Please be seated, gentlemen,” said Tess, whose pallor had been succeeded by an oddly heightened splash of color across her cheek-bones. Yet she was able to smile a little at the hesitancy that betrayed itself as they gathered about her board.

“It may seem odd that I should ask you all to come here, as I have,” she announced finally, “but I wanted this to be a meeting of my friends, of my friends who have tried to help me. It’s not easy to say what I’d like to say. But I feel that in accepting your friendship I haven’t repaid you in the way you expect to be repaid. There seems to be a feeling that I brought things into your lives, something, apparently, which has given some one of you, or all of you, a claim on me. And for the sake of my own pride, if you care to call it that, I want this thing put straight.” She turned to Garretson. “Have I ever done anything that would give you that claim?”

Garretson colored under the directness of her gaze.

“I don’t quite follow you,” he finally acknowledged.

“You tried to pet me as you probably petted other girls you know. But did it ever go beyond that? I want you to be as honest as you would if you knew you were going to face your Maker before morning.”

“No, it didn’t—worse luck!” admitted that candid hedonist. “I never even had a look-in.”

“And you?” demanded the luminous-eyed girl, turning to Thorndyke.

"I don't see the purpose of this," protested the latter, slightly flushed. "But if you're asking if I know of anything that could keep you from being called an honorable girl, I can most positively say that I don't. What I do claim, though, is—"

"And you?" she asked, turning to Brandt.

His smoldering eyes fixed upon her. "Now that the storm's all over," he said with a suspicion of a wry smile, "I don't mind admitting I've wanted to take you in my arms and kiss you till it hurt ever since the first time I saw you. You rather set me on fire. You made me unsure of myself. You even hurt my work. I couldn't soberly and sanely go near my own studio when you were there, because I was afraid of myself—and of you."

"But you didn't and don't love me?" she questioned him calmly.

"No," he admitted, "it wasn't love. I didn't want to marry you."

"Then what did you want?"

"I wanted Beauty, but I didn't quite know why or how!"

There was an unusual calm in Brandt's eyes, as if a storm had just passed. "And I had to be satisfied with getting it on canvas."

"And you?" repeated Tess, turning to Luther Swett, who sat frowning down at his cigar-ash.

“My dear child,” replied that soft-voiced old robin. “I’ve had nothing but a fatherly interest in you. I’ve wanted to help you along, it’s true, but I did that because I saw you had talent.”

“And how did I repay you for that help?” the luminous-eyed girl demanded.

“By confronting me with one of the most extraordinary experiences I’ve had in a long and rather varied career,” he asserted with a rising annoyance. “And I think the sooner it’s over the pleasanter it will be for everybody here.”

“You are quite right,” agreed the girl, as her color went and came. “And you may regard it as over when I hand you back this key, the key of your studio which I came into without entirely understanding the situation or the circumstances.”

She flung the key on the table before him. But he neither touched it nor took it up. He merely sat with his head moving sorrowfully from side to side.

“You’re entirely wrong in this, my dear,” he quietly protested.

“I *was* entirely wrong,” she corrected with the care-free audacity of desperation.

Her flaming eyes rested upon the debonair figure of Arno Ricard. “And you, Monsieur Ricard?” She hurled the question at him. “Was there ever

anything in our relations that was not entirely and strictly business?"

"Certainly not," answered the obese and slightly moist gown-king. He was man of the world enough to know when he was beaten, and he was anxious to be off. "I insisted that Mademoiselle McGuire allow me to loan her gowns, but that was only because our peculiar business arrangement called for it. Our relations were always above reproach—a condition, I may add, that was entirely her own idea."

And then she turned to Jim, in whose blue eyes a great, glad light of understanding was dawning.

"And you?" asked Tess, her voice quavering a little in spite of herself.

"Unlike one or two others here," he answered slowly, and with a dignity quite new to him, "I do understand what this is all about. I'm only sorry I didn't understand sooner. I've known you longer and better than any of the others here, and now, by God, I know you better than ever."

His face was pale but his jaw was resolute as he looked from her to her oddly-assorted guests. He spoke up again, slowly and distinctly. "And if you're asking me, Tess, if I've ever made love to you, I'll answer frankly that I've been doing it ever since I've known you."



There was a stir about the table. But it was neither seen nor considered by the stalwart young country-bred man with the solemn eyes and the resolute jaw.

“I’ve made love to you,” he pursued, “and, what’s more, I’m going to again. For I’ve learned something here to-night that one or two of you fellows may have missed. I’ve found out that only the pure in heart are unafraid. It sounds preachy, but most of the big things in life are that, after all.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Swett.

“I mean that girl’s clean-hearted or she would never have faced you curs!” was Jim’s deliberated retort.

“This,” observed the tired-faced Garretson, as he got up from the table, “looks more and more like our cue for a getaway.”

The others rose also. As Bob Brandt said good-bye, he held her hand a moment and said: “Don’t imagine we’re all going to die and go to hell for having liked you a little and wanted to pet you. They’re all too few like you in this town.” And, Jim standing by her side, momentarily regretted the last word that had fallen from his lips. Perhaps, in cooler blood, they wouldn’t stand as currish as he had claimed.

When their reparting steps were still sounding

down the hallway and the throaty rumble of Swett's motor was starting outside, Jim turned to Tess. He turned and took her greedily in his arms. There, oddly passive, she lay with her tired lids drooping, and her lips met his.

"You're—you're manhandling me," she gasped, when she could get her breath.

"After this," he proclaimed as he gazed into her thin face, "that's going to be my one end in life!"

Then, just to prove that her womanly curiosity was still active, despite her strenuous day and night, Tess asked, "You didn't really doubt me, did you, Jim?"

"I've thought about that," he admitted. "I didn't really, I guess. If I had, I'd never have come here from the station."

"And you didn't hesitate at all about coming back here to-night?"

"You couldn't have kept me away with a battalion of machine-guns!" he declared a trifle too vehemently. He seized her again and kissed her anew quite thoroughly. This time she responded to that touch, responded with all her heart.

"How soon will you marry me, Tess?" he abruptly asked, finally letting her free.

"Whenever you say," she replied. Then she added, after a little hesitation: "But I'd like it to be in

Marysville, Jim, at Aunt Kit's Methodist Church, with her giving me away. It might be more romantic at the Little Church Around the Corner, but I don't think it would 'take' so well. And I mean to have you for keeps." She squeezed his two broad arms tightly.

"Suits me," he said, sighing deeply.

"And afterward—where shall we live?" she asked, anxious, in spite of herself, though she wouldn't have made an issue of it if he had said Timbuctoo.

"It'll have to be New York," Jim responded, a grin suffusing his tired face. "You see, I'm to be sales-manager of the Detroit Accessories Company here when they get making the carburetor. That'll be beginning about June the first. In addition to the royalties I get on the output, of course. You warned me not to be too modest in my price. And believe me, I *wasn't*."

He pulled his contract from his pocket and proudly showed it to her.

"That's wonderful, Jim!" she cried. "Why, we're wealthy. And you won't mind if I'm terribly modern and attend dramatic and art classes at Columbia and all that? Provided, of course, I'm a good cook and manager besides?"

He waved his hand expansively.

"That's up to you," he promised. "But when there's batting around on Broadway to be done, you'll do it *with me?*"

"You bet!" she sighed, once more against his shoulder.

They were married three days later, within the austere walnut-and-white exterior of the Marysville Methodist Church, and the *Marysville Item* the following week carried this characteristic note of the wedding:

Two former Marysvillians, Miss Theresa McGuire, niece of our esteemed townswoman, Miss Katherine McNair, and James Hogan, son of the late Mrs. Mary Hogan, journeyed up from New York last Thursday and were married at the Methodist Church by the Reverend Philip Thurston. The wedding was attended only by immediate friends of the young couple. Mrs. Frederick Blake, of near Parksburg, was Miss McGuire's only attendant, and Mr. Blake acted as best man. The bride was given away by her aunt, Miss McNair.

After a honeymoon motoring-trip through New England, the happy pair will return to New York, where they will reside and where Mr. Hogan will assume his duties as Eastern Sales Manager of the Detroit Accessories Company on June first. Mr. Hogan, probably Marysville High's greatest athlete, is the sole inventor of the Hogan Economy Carburetor, which is beginning to create such a stir in motoring circles. Miss McGuire is the former teacher of the kindergarten grade at the Marysville School.

The *Item* reporter, who secured his information at second-hand and from memory, could not have been expected to note for his readers the proud relieved look upon the thin face of Katherine McNair as she stepped back, gray-haired but straight as an arrow, after performing her little part in the ceremony. Nor the sadly sweet thought that passed through her mind as she stood there watching the proud little back of Tess, ranged beside her sturdy sweetheart, recalling to the older woman a similar ceremony which she had attended twenty-two years before, after a hasty train-ride through the night and a similarly proud back she had fixed her eyes upon while a minister repeated the same familiar words.

“She is her mother all over again,” something kept saying to Katherine McNair, and the mist in her eyes was partly caused by that memory.

Nor did the *Item's* account carry anything about the merry but significant conversation between the newlyweds, as, having spent a quiet evening at home at Miss Katherine McNair's, they piled their luggage the next morning into the car Jim had bought from his old employer, Frank Hammer, bade good-bye to Aunt Kit, and breezed forth upon their honeymoon.

“It seems like a good car,” remarked the bride, “even though it’s a second-hand.”

“It *is* a good car,” Jim maintained, “good as new.”

“Even though it’s been manhandled some,” she ventured.

Their eyes met. Jim’s laugh was as clear as timber-line air.

“It hasn’t been manhandled enough to hurt it,” he replied. “Its heart is O. K., honey, and that’s all that counts, provided it’s *me* who takes care of it from now on.”

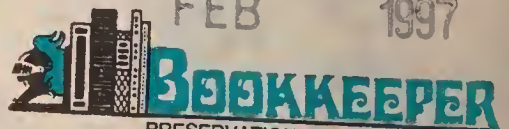
THE END





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